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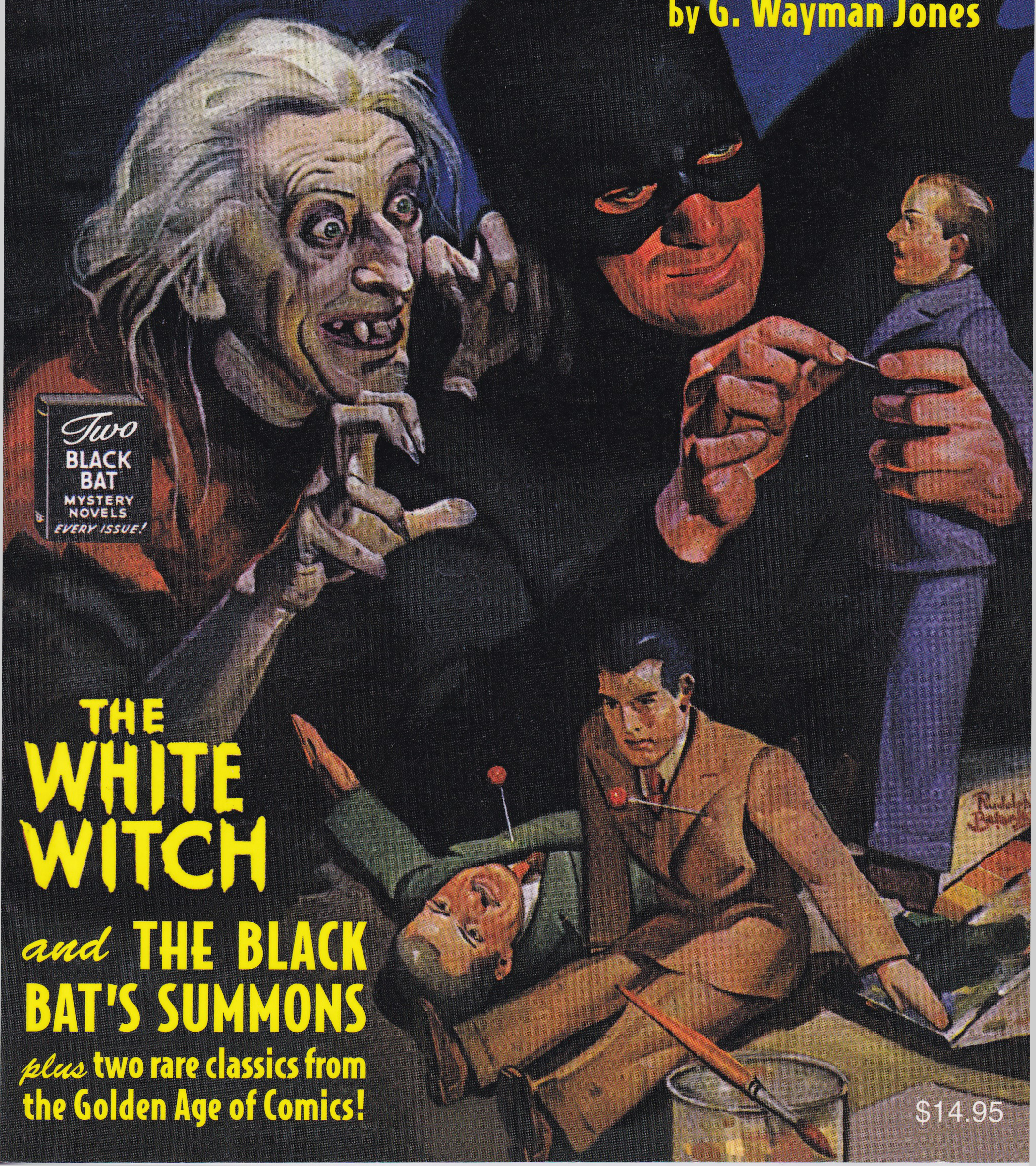
THE BLACK BAT

by G. Wayman Jones



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THE BLACK BAT

by Norvell Page and Norman Daniels
writing as "G. Wayman Jones"

plus

SUPERMOUSE AND HIS FIRST ADVENTURE
and THE MASK—SCOURGE OF CRIME by Kin Platt
rare classics from the Golden Age of Comics

and new historical essays
by Anthony Tollin and Will Murray

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THE BLACK BAT

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THE BLACK BAT'S

In growing horror, the bandaged Silk felt the sharp stab of a hypodermic needle. (CHAPTER XIII)

By G. WAYMAN JONES

Author of "The Black Bat and the Red Menace," "The Black Bat's Triumph," etc.

SUMMONS

A Complete Book-Length Novel

Tony Quinn, Masked Avenger of Crime, Fights to Save a City From the Grimy Clutch of Sinister Looters and Death Dealers!

CHAPTER I
Crime to Come

ON one night, within a space of two hours, death struck in three remotely separated spheres. For two of the three cases, there was no apparent rhyme nor reason for the spilling of innocent blood. It took the genius of one man, the unswerving loyalty of his aides, the crash of gunfire and the fearsome whisper of black wings in the night to uncover the fantastic connection between these murders and the crime plot that paralyzed the city.

Carron Hospital, the city's largest and finest institution of healing, was settling down for the night. The last visitor had gone, the last bed-time count of warm milk or fruit juice distributed and empty glasses collected, the last nightly checkup of temperature and pulse made and recorded on charts. White-jacketed internes, student nurses in striped gowns, regular nurses in crisp white uniforms settled down for another quiet night, to read or gossip or smoke as they relaxed between duty-rounds,

Suddenly the calm was broken. Telephones whirred softly at floor desks. In every corridor, annunciators in the walls were calling softly:

"Attention! Emergency appendectomy in Surgery B. Doctors Bacon, Korwitz, Lundeen report to Surgery B. Nurses Adams, Olson, Fredericks, Cantor report to Surgery B. Emergency appendectomy."

Nurse Olson, blond and pert, came out of a linen closet at the sound of her name and hurried to the desk where the floor nurse bent over her telephone.

"Who is it?" Nurse Olson asked, getting her instrument list. "Old man Blunt?"

The floor nurse nodded without interrupting her swift flow of instructions. Nurse Olson went out into the corridor and fell into step beside a white-jacketed interne hurrying to the same assignment.

"You know," she mused as they waited for the elevator, "life is funny. Here's old Jonas Blunt with forty-odd million dollars and a strangle.hold on half the businesses in town, yet his appendix can burst just as easily as yours or mine."

"Yeah," the interne agreed. "And peritonitis doesn't give a hoot if Blunt does own forty-nine percent of the stock in Carron Hospital either." After a moment he added: "But he'll come through all right. The Chief himself is going to operate. and he never loses a case."

The interne might not have been so optimistic if he could have seen into the Chief's private office on the first floor at that moment. Dr. Andrew Aker, chief of staff of Carron Hospital and one of the world's foremost surgeons, was at his telephone. There was about him, at the moment, none of that machine-like calm that is supposed to mark the surgeon who is about to meet death in open combat.

Dr. Aker's silvery hair was tousled, as if twisted by nervous fingers, his big face was pale, and his jaw line showed the frosty ridges of tensed muscles beneath the skin. There was an unmistakable quiver to the hand that held the telephone.

"You're positive there hasn't been an answer to my classified ad? Then repeat it. Keep running it in every edition until I tell you to stop. And if someone else places a personal advertisement that you think might be in answer to mine, call me at once."

HE cradled the phone and sat shaking his head, clenching his life-giving hand into hard-knuckled fists.

"I can't understand it," he whispered. "Surely he'd find some way to answer—if he saw my appeal."

The telephone whirred shrilly. It was the voice of Dr. Kyle, Aker's senior assistant, reporting.

"Patient ready in Surgery B, Doctor. His white count is well over fourteen thousand, and all diagnoses confirmed."

"Be right there," Dr. Aker answered crisply.

When he stood up, all traces of his previous emotion were gone. His face was calm, hands steady. Lifelong habit of nerve control had made him once more the smoothly functioning surgical machine into whose capable hands a human life was to be entrusted.

He walked into Surgery B, noting subconsciously that his staff was at attention, that instruments fresh from the sterilizer were ready to his hand, and a scrub-up nurse waiting with his gown and mask. Dr. Kyle, his face completely concealed behind his surgeon's mask, nodded a greeting. A moment later the operation was on.

A deft McBurney incision was made, junior assistants with retractors held back the muscle fibers. Dr. Alter held out a gloved hand, felt the impact of a fresh scalpel, incised the peritoneum, reached for haemostats. His whole mind was centered upon the delicate task before him.

He was only subconsciously aware that his senior assistant, Dr. Kyle, was pressing him uncomfortably close, hampering the movement of his right hand. He frowned. Dr. Kyle knew better than that. He had never crowded like that before.

The Black Bat Pits Himself Against the

The Chief turned to spare a precious second for rebuke. His mouth opened behind the mask—stayed open to gush out a sighing moan of utter agony.

There was a sharp, unbearable lance of pain through his heart. Dr. Aker tried to move, to cry out. His muscles refused to respond and there was a red mist before his eyes. He felt himself pitching forward squarely upon the helpless figure on the operating table, felt the scapel still clutched in one hand bite into unprotected flesh. Then complete darkness shut in around him as life fled.

The sudden collapse of Dr. Aker in the midst of the delicate operation froze everyone in the room for an instant. Then with the speed of long training in emergencies, junior assistants leaped to separate the two unmoving bodies—doctor and patient. A white-clad nurse, fighting panic, rushed to call for help. In a moment staff surgeons were thronging the operating room.

"It must have been a stroke," moaned a nurse.

"Stroke, nothing!" snapped a doctor bending over the body of the Chief. "There's a lancet driven to the handle in his breast. Dr. Aker has been stabbed. This is murder!"

Another doctor turned from the still figure on the operating table, his face deathly pale.

"*Two* murders," he corrected. "Jonas Blunt is also dead."

"Where is Dr. Kyle?" someone demanded.

But Aker's senior assistant, Dr. Kyle, had disappeared ...

AS the terrible news was flashing through the corridors of Carron Hospital, death was preparing to strike a second time, ten miles to the south where heavy traffic drummed over the main highway into town.

Pete Cratty. young grocery clerk, had been given the day off. He and his girl had spent the afternoon at a bathing beach and now they were returning to town, tired but happy. Traffic was moving swiftly and Pete Cratty's Model A Ford was racing to hold its position between larger and more powerful cars. Death was, at that moment, farthest from the thoughts of young Cratty and his girl.

But death waited for them a scant hundred yards ahead as they swept over a low hill. Two men who were no more than dark, shapeless shadows in the night, crouched in a patch of underbrush where the forest preserve ran close to the road. From time to time, one of the men turned the thin beam of a pencil flashlight on the dial of his watch. His companion fidgeted nervously, fingering the butt of a rifle that rested across his knees.

"Okay, Trigger," the man with the watch growled hoarsely, after a final inspection. "Time to start. Them yellowish lights coming, second in line, looks like an old jalopy. That oughta be a good one to knock off. Don't miss, now."

"Grow up, Ape," snarled the rifleman, getting onto one knee. "I never miss, and with these daubs of luminous paint on the sights, it's a cinch. Here goes!"

The Model A Ford bearing the unsuspecting Pete Cratty and his girl was directly opposite the patch of underbrush. From the shadows came a brief spurt of orange flame, the sharp crack of a shot. It is doubtful that Pete Cratty even heard the sound, for the small slug that crashed into his brain probably killed him instantly.

The Ford coupé suddenly careened wildly as dead hands slid from the wheel. It went sideward into a screaming skid that carried it directly into the path of a heavy sedan, coming at sixty miles an hour from the opposite direction. There was a terrible broken scream, a rending crash that carried for miles through the night air. Then the only sounds were the shrieks of tortured rubber as other cars braked desperately to avoid plowing into the wreckage, and the babble of hysterical voices.

"Good shooting, Trigger," the man with the watch remarked callously. "Here, gimmee the rifle and go do your stuff like the boss ordered."

"I'll do it," Trigger promised, scrambling to his feet. "Boy, the boss sure has a head on him to figure a setup like this. I'll meet yuh at headquarters, Ape. Scram!"

Leaving the rifle with his companion, the killer ran out into the road and mingled with the horrified throng that was grouped around the tangle of steel and wood. Worming his way to the center where trembling hands had brought two mangled bodies from the wreckage, he cried loudly:

"This is awful! Why don't somebody go back to that farmhouse and phone for an ambulance? Call Carron Hospital. They're closest and they've got the fastest ambulances in town. Hurry, somebody, while there's a chance to save a life!"

Just a mile to the west, death was preparing to make a third visit. Behind the grim gray walls of Pennville Prison, two harried guards stood before the desk of Warden Baume.

"Gone!" one of them was saying excitedly. "Just like that! Three of the toughest prisoners we've got walk out of the dining hall tonight and vanish right into thin air."

Mysterious, Evil Men with Blank Faces!

"Have you checked the auditorium, the work shop, the laundry?" Warden Baume asked, plowing thin fingers through his thinning hair. "We know they're still inside the walls because every light has been on, the guards doubled, and the gate bolted since they disappeared."

"They've all had a once-over search, Warden. Now we're getting together for a more intensive combing of the possible hiding places."

"I've had a feeling for days that there was going to be a break," the second guard said. "After fourteen years on this job, I've learned to smell trouble. Coyne and Bronson and Wolcot have been worrying me because all of a sudden they started behaving too well. I'm always suspicious of tough ones who start acting like angels and go around grinning behind your back."

"Something's up," the first guard grunted. "Coyne, the tommy-gun expert, Bronson, the safe cracker and Wolcot, the kidnap-killer were bitter enemies until a week ago. Then suddenly they were as chummy as brothers. I wish I knew what devil's broth was brewing around here."

"I wish I knew what's brewing outside it," Warden Baume snapped nervously, "In the past month four vicious criminals have been released from here because their time was up—and every one of them has disappeared. None of them have been seen in their old haunts outside—or anywhere else. And, the police say a lot of crooks at large have vanished, too. It's like the calm before the storm—"

The phone interrupted his gloomy tirade. He listened a moment, barked an order and stood up.

"The search parties haven't found the missing prisoners yet, but the guards have found what looks like a pile of fresh dirt outside the south wall, right against the base. We'll go have a look. They may be tunneling from somewhere."

The three men went hurriedly out into the prison yard, made light as day by the power of flood and spotlights blazing down. Warden Baume, known the country over as a prisoner's best friend, led the two guards to the tower stairs and along the wall to where two guards peered down.

"Right down here, sir," one of the riflemen said. "Jacobson just spotted it and it looks like fresh-dug earth. We haven't gone down because you gave orders not to open the gate under any pretext."

"Good."

The five men stood close together, peering down the beam of a spotlight at the mysterious mound below. They were standing thus when the mound erupted a sheet of flame and roaring thunder, sending the entire section of prison wall hurtling skyward. Intermingled with the fragments of shattered rock and mortar were other fragments that quivered hideously and spilled a crimson rain over the ruins.

In the terrible frozen silence that followed the explosion, the guards who had escaped destruction were too stunned to see the three grinning convicts. Like three gray ghosts they darted from the shadows of a twine shed, raced through the breach in the wall and vanished into the night. They were deep in the shadowy forest, running easily and purposefully, when the first lament of "Sobbing Sal," the prison siren, rose on the tortured air.

Three times within two hours death struck—hideously and brutally. Twice without apparent rhyme or reason …

CHAPTER II
Blind—Like a Bat

TONY QUINN, who had once been known as the battling district attorney, set down his breakfast coffee cup with a bang and his powerful hands crushed the morning paper before him with unconscious ferocity.

"Eleven, Silk," he exclaimed harshly. "Eleven of the most fiendish, purposeless murders this city has ever seen. How I'd like to get my hands on the devils responsible for that carnival of blood!"

"Perhaps you will, sir," Norton "Silk" Kirby, his valet, said quietly.

He recognized the signs as Tony Quinn's once handsome face tensed until the network of scar tissues around his eyes glistened. Those scars were mementos of a day when a bottle of acid, thrown by a gangster at a pile of vital evidence, had struck the fighting district attorney's face instead. From the very pinnacle of his success, Tony Quinn had been plunged in a single instant to the depths of helpless, useless blindness. His retirement was seen by the world as the act of a lonely, frustrated, embittered blind man.

Only three other persons knew of the surgical miracle that had not only restored Tony Quinn's sight but had given him, in addition, a super sight—the sharp night vision of a bat.

One of those three was "Silk" Kirby, so named from the days when he had been the smoothest confidence man who ever trimmed an unsuspecting rich victim. Then one eventful night, when he had fallen on hungry days. he had gone outside his "trade," and had entered Tony Quinn's home in the darkness, with a nefarious purpose in mind. Quinn had caught him and, after a long talk with the blind ex-district attorney, Silk had stayed.

He had forsaken his "profession" to become valet, butler and friend to Tony Quinn. When the miracle of surgery created the Black Bat, Nemesis of Crime, out of the human wreckage that was Tony Quinn, Silk had become his eager lieutenant.

"By the way, sir"—Silk nodded his nearly bald head at the classified pages of the morning paper before him—"that ad is here in the 'Personals' again."

"It is?" Quinn's eyes narrowed, "Any changes in wording?"

"Not a one, sir. Here's what it says. 'Black Bat, must talk to you at once, somehow. You alone may be able to prevent ghastly crimes. Human lives depend on your getting in touch with me immediately. Send instructions to Box Twenty-nine A.' That's even the same box number, sir."

"Hm-m-m," Quinn mused. "That's the first time anyone ever sought the Black Bat that way. Well, by now whoever it is should have my answer."

"Answer, sir?" Silk gaped, "But we thought—"

"You thought," Quinn corrected, "that it was a trick to trap me. I couldn't ignore the appeal, Silk, so I slipped out after you were in bed last night and mailed an answer."

"But—but, how could you answer without disclosing your true identity, sir? You know we heard just two days ago that the underworld has raised the price on the Black Bat's head to seventy-five thousand dollars. If anyone guessed that you—"

"Stop worrying, you granny," Quinn chuckled affectionately. "I appointed an intermediary in approved gangster style—someone to learn the advertiser's identity for me so I can make contact direct in my own fashion."

"A—an intermediary, sir?"

"A man of sterling worth and unquestioned integrity. Captain McGrath, Silk."

THERE was an instant's startled silence, then a roar of unrestrained laughter in which Quinn's mellow voice joined heartily. It was indeed a rare joke, for while there was no more honest officer alive than dogged, chunky, short-tempered McGrath, there was no one more grimly determined to capture the Black Bat.

It was not personal animosity, for the Black Bat's unselfish aid helped McGrath's rise from sergeant to captain. But to McGrath, the law was inflexible, and for all his good works, the Black Bat operated outside and even against the law. Therefore he was a criminal to be smashed. McGrath had ideas about the Black Bat and those ideas always narrowed down to the sharp finger of suspicion pointing straight at Tony Quinn.

"McGrath!" Silk chortled. "That's rich."

"Also," Quinn pointed out, "it's sound. If the unknown contacts McGrath, you can bet I'll hear of it, for McGrath will see it as a heaven-sent chance to trap me. Then, too, he—"

He broke off as the doorbell whirred.

"Speak of the devil," Quinn murmured as Silk hurriedly removed the newspapers. "No one but McGrath and Commissioner Warner ever visit me this early in the day. Show them in, Silk."

As Silk went to the door, a startling change took place in Tony Quinn. His sparkling eyes suddenly went dead and lifeless. From beside him came the ever-present cane with which he cautiously *tap-tapped* his way to meet the visitors. His blank gaze was fixed unswervingly ahead, for the years of genuine agonizing blindness had made the part he played grimly realistic.

Before Silk could announce the visitors, McGrath shouldered the valet aside and charged up to Quinn, furiously waving a letter.

"You—you—" he raged. "So I'm contact man for that murdering crook, the Black Bat, am I? 'Leave your name with McGrath if you want the Black Bat', eh? Listen, you phony blind man, I'm going to get you this time and prove—"

"McGrath!" Commissioner Warner barked furiously. "If you don't stop annoying Tony with that asinine belief that he's the Black Bat, I'll see you back in harness if it's my last official act. Tony, I apologize for his manners."

"It's quite all right, Commissioner. Secretly, I really enjoy having my helpless condition suspected. But I'm afraid the reason for this outburst eludes me. Is it about that paper I hear crackling?"

"It is," Warner chuckled, helping Quinn to his chair. "Someone ran a want ad last night for the Black Bat. McGrath set a trap for the Black Bat at the Want Ad desk but instead caught a letter appointing himself contact man. He's a bit burned up."

Quinn chuckled appreciatively and deliberately turned to face an empty chair some distance from where McGrath sat.

"Silk read me that ad, Captain, and to a blind man's sharpened senses, it seemed sincere. Aren't you risking human lives by holding back that letter? After all, the Black Bat has been instrumental in saving lives, I believe, a number of times."

"Don't worry," McGrath growled uncomfortably. "I checked up on the advertiser and he isn't waiting for an answer. He's dead!"

"Dead?" Quinn's iron control nearly broke for an instant.

"Uh-huh. That ad was placed by Dr. Conrad Aker who was murdered during an operation at Carron Hospital last night."

QUINN'S jaw set and his fists clenched.

"Of all the ruthless murders! God knows how many innocent persons may die in days to come because the world has been deprived of such a great surgeon and healer. Could you find any reason for the murder, or for his appeal to the Black Bat?"

"Not a trace," Warner said bitterly, "and we've been on it all night. Aker's life was blameless and he had no known enemies, We had the murder pinned on his assistant, Dr. Kyle, until we found Kyle knocked out in the linen room. The killer jumped him in there, stole his gown and mask and boldly took his place in the operating room until he got a chance to stab Aker. Then he calmly walked out and vanished."

"I wonder," Quinn mused, "if the death of Jonas Blunt, the millionaire, on the operating table was incidental or a part of some design."

"We've tried to answer that, too."

Warner sighed. "When Aker toppled forward, he accidentally drove his scalpel into Blunt's chest, but it was the delay in completing the operation that actually killed Blunt. I rather think Blunt was no more than the innocent bystander, though a plot to kill him would be more understandable. He controlled a vast financial empire."

"How about that wreck out on South Highway?"

Warner cursed feelingly. "Of all the vicious, ruthless things! Not a ghost of reason for killing that young fellow Cratty, either, unless someone deliberately wanted to create a horrible wreck that would take three other innocent lives."

"Could that be connected in any way with the prison break not far from there?" Quinn asked.

"We can't figure how," Warner admitted. "The wreck occurred twenty minutes before the break and a mile away. Everyone at the wreck was sifted through a Highway Patrol blockade before they got away. There wasn't a trace of the three rats who escaped. They've vanished into thin air."

"I understand," Quinn said quietly, "that vanishing into thin air has come to be quite the fashion among crooks."

McGrath leaped to hit feet, purpling angrily.

"Got you!" he bawled. "You gave yourself away that time, Mr. Black Bat! Nobody outside the Department could know about that, except one of top crooks. It's a secret that—"

"Oh, dear!" Quinn chuckled. "I hate to spoil your case, Captain, but I fear I must. You see, Silk and I take long walks every day, and everywhere we go we chat with old friends on the force. You'd be surprised at the Department secrets I know, Captain."

"You have *bats* in the belfry, McGrath," Warner snapped. "Tony, I wanted to talk to you about that very thing. It's got me worried sick, waiting for the explosion I know is bound to come. All of our worst criminals have disappeared, Tony—simply vanished from all their haunts overnight. Not even the stoolies know what's become of them. But crime is increasing. The trouble is, the crimes seen to be committed by a gang of strangers no one can identify and who don't answer to any descriptions of out-of-towners. I'm convinced, Tony, that some new czar has taken over the underworld with a new scheme—and I'm equally convinced that prison break tonight was engineered by the same czar."

McGRATH

TONY QUINN was thoughtful a moment, before he asked a question.

"Haven't you any hint of what might be brewing?"

"I'm getting an inkling," Warner answered grimly. "You evidently don't know of the extra that hit the streets less than an hour ago."

"No," Quinn admitted, "As a matter of fact, I slept late and Silk stayed in this morning to have my breakfast ready. What on earth has happened, Commissioner?"

"John Bradney, president of Bradney Wholesale Drug, has disappeared. He left his office last night and never arrived at his home. No one knows whether it's kidnapping, amnesia—or flight."

"Good Lord!" Quinn exclaimed, startled. "Wasn't it just last week that stockholders of Bradney Drug were demanding an investigation of the firm? His disappearance now means they'll slaughter Bradney stock on the market."

"And how they'll slaughter it!" Warner exclaimed fervently. "The Department's financial squad is going crazy. We tried to keep Bradney's disappearance secret but some anonymous trouble-maker tipped off the papers and they had an extra out before we could do anything. The fat's in the fire now."

He stood up wearily and crossed the room to rest a hand on Tony Quinn's shoulder.

"We've got to run along, Tony. Heaven only knows what new horror has broken since we left. I know you like to sit and ponder these problems, Tony, and I know your trained mind frequently digs me out of pretty deep messes. If you can find a ray of sunshine in all this trouble, I'll be everlastingly grateful."

"I'll try as I've never tried before," Quinn promised, getting to his feet. "Keep me posted on new developments, won't you, Commissioner? And you, Captain—good luck on your hunt for the Black Bat."

McGrath growled unintelligibly and headed for the door. Commissioner Warner waited until the captain was beyond earshot, and turned back to Quinn.

"Tony," he said with a meaning that was quite clear to Quinn, who knew the commissioner had ideas of his own about the identity of the Black Bat—which he kept to himself, "never in my life have I wished as hard that McGrath's suspicions that you are the Black Bat were true. I could use the Black Bat's help—plenty."

"Commissioner," the former district attorney said soberly, and in his very tone was something that might possibly have been interpreted as a promise, "I've never wished any harder than I am right now that McGrath was right. How I'd like to tackle the fiends responsible for what happened last night!"

CHAPTER III
Black Wings on the Trail

SILK'S face was somber as he came back from showing the two men to the door. Tony Quinn hurled his cane onto a chair and let the cold flames of anger come into his eyes.

"A horribly senseless mess," Silk ventured. "I feel sorry for Commissioner Warner, having those murders last night and then the disappearance of Mr. Bradney come on top of his other worry. I imagine he scarcely knows which mystery to tackle first."

"There's only one mystery to tackle," Quinn grated.

"You mean—"

"I mean that if everything that's happened, from the vanishing crooks to the grocery clerk's murder isn't part of one grim pattern; I—I'll smoke McGrath's brand of cigars the rest of my life. And that's the worst penalty I can think of for being wrong."

"Then the Black Bat is going to fly again, sir?"

"The Black Bat is definitely going to fly again, Silk. Call Carol and Butch right away. There's work to be done."

His slim fingers probed under the mantel of the fireplace and touched a hidden button. The whole brick front slid noiselessly out to reveal a secret room; completely fitted out as a crime detection laboratory, wardrobe and arsenal for the Black Bat.

Silk entered the hidden room and went straight to an unlisted telephone in a small cabinet. There was an eager light in his eyes as he lifted the receiver, a keen anticipation of danger and excitement ahead.

Half an hour later, Tony Quinn was detailing the known facts about the new crime wave to his other two aides—Carol Baldwin and Jack "Butch" O'Leary.

It was Carol Baldwin, blonde and lovely, who was really responsible for the creation of the Black Bat. Her father, a policeman dying of gangdom's slugs, had bequeathed his eyes to Tony Quinn on condition that they be used to perpetuate his own relentless war against crime. An obscure Midwestern doctor had performed the operation, transplanting the dying man's eyes to Tony Quinn's.

It was not until the operation was over that Quinn discovered the real miracle. With his new eyes he could see as well in darkness as in daylight! It was this fact, and Carol's imagination, that had led to the creation of that romantic and mysterious being— the Black Bat.

Butch O'Leary, the fourth member of the crime-fighting group, was neither romantic nor handsome. An ex-pugilist, Butch more than made up in strength, courage and dogged loyalty what he lacked in mental agility. No torture ever devised could drag from him the secret of the Black Bat's true identity.

THERE was a pause after Tony Quinn finished his recital. Then Butch broke the thoughtful silence.

"Say, Boss," he said, frowning. "I'm with you a hundred percent to get whoever killed all them people. But there's one thing I don't quite get. What gives you the idea that all those things are part of the same scheme? Maybe I'm dumb, but a big shot doc and a grocery clerk and the head screw at the pen just don't fit together in my mind at all."

"If Butch is dumb," Carol said, "so am I. I don't get the connection, either, Tony."

"Call it a hunch, if you will," Quinn said slowly. "But my hunches are usually built on little insignificant factors that most people overlook, For one thing, all three crimes are alike in their absolutely ruthless indifference to innocent lives, Every one of them involved innocent bystanders, which is something criminals usually avoid because it

arouses public sentiment to fever heights. For another thing, there is an almost glaring effort to make each one look like indiscriminate, senseless slaughter. That's pretty thin reasoning, I admit, but it convinces me that one brain planned all three."

"How about the disappearance of Bradney, the drug man?" Silk asked. "You didn't include that?"

"I think these other crimes were part of the preparation for some tremendous 'killing.' And, I think the disappearance of Bradney might possibly be the first step in the pay-off. But there I'm only guessing, because I haven't any reason for tying him in with the murders at all. A connection may develop later."

"I'm convinced," Carol smiled, standing up. "What can we do to get our counter-attack into motion, Tony?"

"There's work for all of us," Quinn said. "I'm only sorry the Black Bat must stay in his cave until nightfall. Carol, I think you'd better be a newspaper reporter for the day. Your job is to check on the murder of the grocery clerk. Get the names of all the witnesses who stopped for the accident—State Police Headquarters will have a list—and interview them all. Keep your eyes open for any little suspicious items that may have been overlooked."

"Aye, aye, Skipper," Carol saluted, grinning.

"Silk, you know stock market operations and you have a disguise that makes you look more like a banker than any banker ever did. Your job will be to haunt the Stock Exchange. Watch what happens to Bradney Drug stock and also to stocks in which Jonas Blunt had a guiding hand. If any one individual seems to be raiding them heavily, find out all about that person. Also, keep an ear open for rumors about the financial soundness of other companies. An attempt to undermine confidence in some other stock might give us a lead."

"How about me, Boss?" Butch broke in anxiously. "Don't I get a chance to do anything?"

"You, Butch O'Leary"— Tony Quinn turned on him with mock gravity—"are going to prison."

BUTCH'S big jaw dropped, and he looked up in alarm.

"Prison?" he exploded. "Hey, now, what—"

"Only for a visit, I hope," Quinn chuckled. "Isn't one of your old pals a—er—guest at Pennville?"

"He ain't no pal of mine," Butch howled wrathfully. "Sure, a little slug I know named Kieffer who used to hang around Conway's Gymnasium got sent up last spring for peddling happy-dust, but—"

"Today is visitor's day at the prison," Quinn said reflectively. "In spite of the blast, I hardly think prisoners who took no part in the break will be deprived of their privileges. I want you to visit Kieffer, tell him you've got a big haul lined up and want his advice on who might help you put it over. Try to pump him about last night's break. I'm positive the prisoners must have at least an inkling of what was behind it or who engineered it."

"Boy, I'll put that over," Butch boasted, grinning. "I know how to handle a rat like Kieffer, Boss."

"Good. We'll all meet here this evening to compare notes. And be careful. These assignments may not sound dangerous, but at any moment one of you may stumble across the trail of those killers. Keep on your toes every moment!"

Carol had been narrowly studying his face.

"Tony," she said quietly, "you're planning something."

Quinn laughed reassuringly. "Don't worry. The Black Bat can't fly by day, much as he'd like to. But there's no law against blind Tony Quinn's visiting Carron Hospital for a physical examination. Dr. Robbins, there, was one of the doctors who examined me after the acid burned out my eyes.

"Also, I noticed in the paper that Dr. Robbins was the man who answered the alarm, rushed into the operating room and discovered the scalpel plunged into Dr. Aker's breast. The coincidence is more than I can resist. I'm hoping he'll see me for old times' sake and do a little valuable gossiping about the murder."

He kissed Carol lightly and watched her follow Butch into the tunnel that would take them out through an inconspicuous gatehouse at the rear of the estate. When he turned away, his face was somber.

A taxi took Tony Quinn to Carron Hospital an hour later. The driver led his fare to the big reception desk and then went back to wait in his cab for Quinn's return.

Outwardly, Carron Hospital's efficient staff was carrying on as usual, but despite their unwavering blankness, Quinn's sharp eyes read the shock of the brutal murder in strained faces and reddened eyes. A slim man with a haggard face and a cap of bandages surmounting his black hair spoke briefly to the receptionist before going to an inner office. Quinn was sure, even before he heard the man addressed by name, that this was the Dr. Kyle who had been attacked and impersonated by the killer.

As Quinn had expected, it was almost impossible to reach any of the staff physicians for anything less than an emergency case. Not even the fretful insistence of a frustrated blind man, a pose which Tony Quinn thoroughly detested, could gain him an interview with Dr. Robbins. Finally, in desperation, the girl made several phone calls and returned with word that Dr. Wetherell would see him for a few minutes. Quinn masked his elation by grumbling at not reaching Dr. Robbins as he had hoped.

"I'M sorry to intrude at a time like this, Doctor,"

Quinn apologized as he shook hands with the sandy-haired Dr. Wetherell, "but I have a horror of appendicitis, and some pains in my abdomen have had me worried sick."

"We'll set your mind at rest, one way or the other," Wetherell answered with a professional briskness that failed to hide his worried preoccupation. "Here, let me help you to a chair."

During the examination, Quinn interspersed a rambling account of imaginary symptoms with shrewd questions designed to draw the doctor out on any inside gossip concerning the murder. In an organization as closely knit as a great hospital's staff, there are few secrets.

"But it seems impossible," Quinn protested, after fruitless efforts to learn of any internal squabbles or professional jealousies that might have caused the murder, "that a stranger could mingle with all those doctors and nurses in the operating room without being noticed."

"Not unusual at all, Quinn," Wetherell replied absently. "Everyone in the operating room wears a surgeon's mask that completely covers the face, and gloves that hide the hands. As long as that stranger handled his duties smoothly, without interrupting the smooth routine of the operation, no one would suspect a thing."

Quinn started involuntarily.

"You mean the killer who took Dr. Kyle's place took part in the operation, without arousing suspicion? Then that must indicate that he, too, was a trained medical man!"

"My examination is finished," Dr. Wetherell interrupted pointedly. "I can assure you, Quinn, that your appendix is sound. Your pains probably came from a bit of indigestion. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll have the nurse take you to your cab."

Although outwardly apologetic at his impertinence, Quinn was tingling with excitement. Learning that the killer of Dr. Aker could only have been another medical man was a definite step forward.

As the nurse led Quinn out onto the hospital steps, the driver leaped from the waiting taxi below and came hounding up to get his fare, Quinn stiffened abruptly and a hard smile touched his lips. His fishing expedition had caught him more than he bargained for.

The waiting taxi was the same one that had brought him, but this thin-faced, cold-eyed thug in a hacker's uniform was not the friendly driver who had promised to wait. Quinn's nerves tingled as the man took his arm and directed him to the parked taxi.

"Say," Quinn made his voice querulous, "what's going on? You don't sound like the driver who brought me here."

"Sure I am." The driver grinned, not knowing that his "blind" fare could see every facial expression. "Got some trouble with my throat that makes my voice change sometimes, is all."

Quinn's eyes narrowed behind the dark glasses as the substitute driver openly waved a signal to two tough talking thugs waiting in a car parked across the street. One of the thugs grinned in answer and drew a finger suggestively across his throat,

A chill touched Quinn's nerves. There was no mistaking the murderous intent behind this byplay. Yet he was unarmed and forced to maintain his pretense of blind helplessness at all costs. His only hope was to keep silent and wait for a break. But at least, he might learn why a helpless blind man on an innocent visit to a doctor should suddenly become the object of an elaborate kidnap plot.

"Take me home, driver," he said fretfully. "I'm very tired."

"Take it easy, friend." The driver grinned to himself menacingly. "In no time at all you'll be taking a nice, long rest."

CHAPTER IV
Too Much Curiosity

ALMOST as soon as the cab started, with a jerk, Quinn heard the roar of a second motor and the squeal of cramped tires as the car across the street swung around to follow. When the cab swung off in the opposite direction from the way Tony Quinn wanted to go, he said nothing, but his lips pressed tight. His only weapon now was surprise, and when the time came he would use that to its utmost.

He was pondering possible reasons for the events when the cab abruptly swung up a short ramp and into a ramshackle service garage. A hard-faced man in greasy overalls appeared and jerked a thumb toward the rear. The cab growled on in low gear and rolled onto an elevator that immediately began to ascend to an upper floor. Behind it, the trailing car rolled in and disgorged its two passengers.

"Here, here," Quinn cried excitedly. "What's going on here? I'm not being taken home. What are you—"

The cabby leaned back and deliberately knocked his passenger back against the cushions with a well driven fist.

"Keep your yap buttoned, Dark Eyes. You'll find out what's going on soon enough."

The elevator halted at the second floor level and the cab door was jerked open. Quinn saw the other two hoods who had evidently raced up a stairway after leaving their car below.

"Outside, Nosey," one of them ordered, clawing a hand into Quinn's coat. "And don't put on that shrinking violet act either, Quinn. We know you're plenty tough."

Tony Quinn shrugged and climbed out. He recognized the speaker, now, as one "Red" Wallis, a small-time hoodlum he had once prosecuted. The other two were strangers.

"Okay," he said quietly. "You boys are getting braver when only three of you attack a blind man. What is this—a ransom snatch?"

Red Wallis cursed luridly, "There ain't enough dough made to buy you out of this, Quinn."

Guns appeared in three right hands and their muzzles nudged Quinn across the shadowy floor to a cubby-hole office in a dark corner. He stepped across the threshold—and almost betrayed himself with a start of sheer amazement.

A man sat at a small desk, evidently awaiting them. He was a big man with a thick body and bulky, powerful shoulders. But the most unbelievable thing about him was his face. It was as smooth and pink and delicately regular as a woman's, despite its size. "Baby-face" was the word that popped into Tony Quinn's mind.

"Good work, boys," the baby-faced man said, without a trace of emotion on his weird features. "So this was once the battling D.A., eh? Okay, Quinn, tell us who sent you to pump Robbins on that Akers murder."

"No one," Quinn denied with an air of injured innocence. "I get tired of sitting in darkness with nothing to do so I try to dope out the solution to crimes. I thought Dr. —"

"It won't wash, Quinn," Baby-face interrupted coldly. "If you weren't wise to something, why did you insist you had to see Doc Robbins instead of some other doc?"

SHEER surprise held Quinn speechless. His innocently insisting on seeing Dr. Robbins had convinced them he knew something about the crimes. Why? What was Robbins' part in the grim case? Was he behind the murder of Dr. Akers?

Baby-face snarled abruptly. "I didn't figure you'd talk. But I guarantee you won't ever talk to anybody else. Hold him, you guys."

A long-bladed knife slid into his big hand. He got up and came toward Quinn with his weird face blank, and murder in his eyes. Red Wallis and the fake cabby pinched Quinn's arms. Baby-face lifted the knife, holding it like a sword.

Tony Quinn seemed literally to explode into action. A well-placed kick sent Red Wallis reeling and freed one arm for a hard smash at the cabby's jaw. The third hood lifted his gun.

"Don't shoot, you fool!" Baby-face bawled. "Do you want the place full of cops? Hit him! Smash him down!"

But neither the flailing gun butt nor the flickering knife blade could seem to connect with Tony Quinn's hurtling figure. Yet every movement he made seemed utterly blind and unguided. He seemed simply to reel and trip and blunder around, filling the air with roundhouse swings and blind kicks in a fury of desperation.

It seemed only barest accident that somehow one of those swings connected with Red Wallis' jaw, or that, tripping over the unconscious body, blind Tony Quinn should fall onto the thug's fallen pistol. The others stopped instinctively as he lifted the gun.

"Charge him, you fools!" Baby-face roared. "He can't see to hit anything!"

It was a tense moment for Tony Quinn. If he shot in delf-defense, he would later have to explain to the police how a blind man could win a gun battle with four vicious killers. But if that deadly knife or a swinging gun butt reached him, it was quick, and certain death.

The three hoods started forward in simultaneous rush as they regained their courage. Tony Quinn raised the pistol and blazed away apparently shooting in a blind frenzy. But he was careful to send a slug hissing close to each face. The three yelled in terror and fell back from the wild rain of death.

"I've got a blind man's hearing!" Quinn warned. "I'll shoot at the first sound."

Then from below he heard the shrill whirr of a police whistle, loud cries and the pound of feet. The sounds, in combination with his own menacing pistol, were too much for the thugs. With almost ludicrous caution, they tiptoed to the door and fled out into the garage a moment before police pounded up from below.

"Stay back, you dirty killers!" Quinn cried, making his voice tremble hysterically, and pointing the pistol in his hand several yards away from the stairway. "I'm blind but I'll shoot every time I hear one of you move!"

"It's Tony Quinn!" one of the police cried. "Hey, put down the cannon, Tony. It's Sergeant Glisson, and the police."

"Quinn!" bawled the unmistakable voice of Captain McGrath. "By Godfrey, I might have known he'd be messed up in any gunfights. Where is he? This time I'm going to get some straight answers!"

McGrath's chunky figure hurtled into the little zoom and stopped short. McGrath's bull-like bellow was choked off into a torrent of profanity as he glared at the pathetic, crumpled figure at his feet.

Poor, blind Tony Quinn, overcome by the excitement and his narrow escape from death, had quietly fainted ...

THE sun was dropping behind the horizon when Tony Quinn drained the last cup of Silk's delicious coffee and pushed back from the table to grin at his three aides. His eyes were merry and he showed no ill effects from his recent narrow escape from death.

"Boy!" Butch snickered, reluctantly pushing back an empty plate. "I'd give a million bucks to have seen McGrath's face when you pulled that phony faint to keep from answering his questions. I'll bet he boiled when all those cops started fussing over you and insisted on bringing you straight home."

"McGrath has an even temper," Quinn chuckled. "Always bad. But it didn't keep him from making a thorough search for those other three thugs. They got clean away, though, down a hidden stairway."

"I can't forget what a narrow escape you had," Carol shivered. "But, Tony, won't the police force that Red Wallis to tell them about the rest of the gang?"

"I doubt it," Quinn said, "As I remember Wallis from my days as prosecutor, no amount of third degreeing ever got him to talk. But he's probably such a small cog on a big crime wheel that he knows little. I wasn't hiding much when I told Commissioner Warner a short time ago that I had no idea why I was kidnapped. I actually haven't. But let's hear what your investigations unearthed, Carol, what did you learn?"

"Practically nothing," Carol said disgustedly. "I found and interviewed every witness except one. They all agreed that Cratty's car simply went out of control and smashed into that other car without excuse or warning. Nobody saw a thing that could possibly be considered suspicious, either before or after the wreck."

"You said every witness except one?" Quinn frowned.

"Yes, and maybe that means something. Everyone I talked to remembered that right after the accident a man pushed through the crowd, looked at the two cars, then shouted for someone to call an ambulance, Afterward he disappeared and the state police, who searched every car for those escaped convicts, have no record of his leaving. All anyone remembers was that he was small and thin and had an odd face—sort of blank and expressionless, they said. Does it give you any ideas, Tony?"

"It gives me a headache," Quinn growled. "Your description of the man's face sounds almost as though Baby-face had a half-pint brother. Two blank-faced men in one puzzle is a little too much for coincidence, But if your missing witness is related to Baby-face, he should be a Number One suspect as the killer who caused the wreck. Then, on the other hand, if he was the killer, why should he risk his neck to appear and order an ambulance? It doesn't make sense now, but it may, later."

QUINN turned then to another of his helpers.

"Butch," he asked, "what did you get out of your day's work?"

"Mostly whispers, Boss. I sprung that on Keiffer, about looking for somebody to help pull a job, but he clammed up. Claimed he was out of touch with any mob. I did find out, though, that everybody's whispering about some new underworld big shot who's building a mob. Nobody knows who he is or what his racket is, but he won't take anybody except top men in each line. He even brushed off a couple of little mugs who tried to chisel in. It was him engineered that break, though. All the cons know that, but not much else except it ain't a bit healthy to talk."

"That's something, at least. Silk, how did you do?"

"Rather well, sir," Silk said proudly. "As you guessed, the market ran wild with Bradney stock dragging bottom. A man named Kroner, a newcomer in town, seemed to do most of the buying. Jonas Blunt's stocks also sagged somewhat, and the same Kroner traded in them quite profitably."

"Well"—Quinn's eyebrows lifted—"we'll have to meet the stock market genius. Maybe we can learn the secret of his success. Anything else, Silk?"

"Yes, sir. That rumor about Bradney being unsound was proved false. An investigation, rushed through by the commission, revealed their financial structure as excellent. Of course stocks went up at once. Now there's a whisper I could not run down, sir, to the effect that Morgan Oil is shaky."

Quinn snapped his fingers.

"Silk, you practically hit the jackpot. With what Carol and Butch and I have learned, we can tackle this scheme from both ends—for I'm more certain now than ever that it all ties up. It's time for black bats to fly, and lucky for me I have such dependable friends and helpers."

"Got work for us, Boss?" Butch asked hopefully. "Maybe a jaw or two I can take a good poke at?"

"Plenty of jaws to poke." Quinn laughed. "But not just yet. Right now I want you to keep an eye on the home of Phil Morgan of Morgan Oil. I'm sure he'll be home because I saw by the paper his wife is entertaining tonight. Keep out of sight Butch, but watch for any kidnap attempts. I'll join you there, later. Carol, you find out all you can about the astute Mr. Kroner. Silk will stay here to take calls and head off McGrath if he insists on pinching me to see if I'm real."

While Carol obligingly stepped out of the room, Quinn hurriedly dressed in dead black from crepe-soled black shoes to black shirt. Over his head he drew a close-fitting black hood that masked the upper half of his face, hiding the revealing acid burns.

Last of all, he donned a peculiar black cape, queerly ribbed so that when he extended his arms, it opened out like the wings of a huge bat. Now the costume was complete and the Black Bat was ready to fly once more against crime. A pair of heavy .45 caliber automatics slid out of sight, one under each arm, as Carol came back into the room.

"Ready?" The Black Bat smiled at her. "You two had better go out first and take cabs. I'll need the coupé. I'm really going to range the town tonight, but ahead of anything else, I'm going to try to find out why chatting with Dr. Robbins is as good as a paid-in-advance funeral."

"Do you think he might have been the one who murdered Dr. Aker?" Carol asked.

"I don't know what to think yet, Carol. Baby-face and his killers could have been working for Robbins when they tried to eliminate me, or they could have been hired by someone else to keep people away from Robbins until his mouth could be effectively closed. There wasn't a thing in their conversation this afternoon to indicate which, but a tie-up of some kind between Robbins and the murder is definitely established.

"For that matter, I'm interested in Dr. Wetherell, too. He could have tipped someone to the fact that Tony Quinn was pumping him about the murder. He closed up like a clam after inadvertently letting slip the information that Aker's killer had to be a trained medical man. He could have been respecting professional ethics, or trying to cover guilty knowledge, when he shooed me out so quickly, then. In fact, there are almost endless possibilities to be investigated further."

"Be careful, Tony," Carol whispered.

She stood on tiptoe, kissed him lightly and was gone.

A few moments later, the Black Bat dropped into the tunnel and hurried away, his super-sight easily penetrating the inky blackness. It was time for the underworld to shiver and withdrew into their rat holes. The shadow of ribbed black wings was once more sweeping over the city.

CHAPTER V
Murder Misfires

DR. LAWRENCE ROBBINS was obviously distraught and ill at ease. He paced the floor of his book-lined library with a jerky, nervous stride, pausing from time to time to stare out the window into the darkness. He was a big man but somehow, tonight, his broad shoulders seemed shrunken and bowed and there were lines of strain in his big face, around red-veined eyes.

Abruptly he seemed to arrive at some momentous decision. His jaw set grimly and he drove one fist into the other palm with a purposeful smack.

Whirling, he dropped into the chair behind his desk and stretched a hand toward the telephone on one corner. Before be could reach it, however, the instrument rang with an incoming call. Dr. Robbins grunted with annoyance and drew back his hand. The phone rang again with shrill insistence. With obvious reluctance, he picked it up.

"I thought I'd catch you at home, Lawrence," a tense voice greeted him. "How about it? You've had time to think things over by now. You know what it would do to the hospital's reputation and yours, too, if someone talked. You wouldn't chance that would you?"

"I have made my decision," Robbins answered coldly, "and nothing you can say will make me change. I'm going to go through with it—and that's final!"

"You're nothing but an egomaniac with a dictator complex!" the voice cried, trembling with fury. "You expect everyone to crawl to your feet and squeeze themselves into the tight little mold that represents your warped ideas. And you have the nerve to go on posing as a big-hearted, unselfish healer of the sick. Why, you—"

With a roar of incoherent rage, Dr. Lawrence Robbins cut off the tirade by slamming the telephone into its cradle with a bang. Breathing heavily. he jerked open a drawer of his desk and snatched up a grim-looking blued steel pistol that lay under some sheets of paper. Glancing at the clip to see that it was fully loaded, he jammed the automatic into a hip pocket and started purposefully toward the door.

"Just a moment, Doctor," a voice spoke quietly from the deep shadows at the far end of the library, "I'd like to have a short talk with you before you start on your grim errand."

Dr. Robbins whirled around and his jaw dropped. A great black shadow, like the wings of a soaring bat was sliding over the rows of books, moving relentlessly toward him, Then he saw what cast that grim shadow—a man dressed entirely in black, from black hood to black shoes, with a queerly ribbed black cape that was somehow like the furled wings of a huge bat.

After the first moment of shocked paralysis, Dr. Robbins' eyes blazed and his right hand sped toward his pocket.

"Don't," the Black Bat warned sharply, moving his hand so that light glinted from a heavy automatic poised at his hip. "This thing in my hand is no toy, though I have no intention of using it unless you force me to."

"Wh—what do you want?" Dr. Robbins choked

A great black shadow was sliding over the row of books.

out, dropping his hand. "Who are you? How did you—"

AFTER the first shock of surprise, he seemed to have entirely recovered his poise. He studied the black-clothed apparition narrowly.

"I am the Black Bat, which should reassure you, Doctor, that I'm not here either to kill or to rob, I came here for some information you may be able to supply. If you will be seated, with your hands on the desk in plain sight. I'll put up my gun and we can both relax."

Robbins hesitated a moment, then obeyed.

"If it's medical advice you want," he grunted, "I'll tell you flatly that I don't treat criminals or anyone whose identity I don't know."

"An excellent rule, Doctor." The Black Bat smiled. "Fortunately, my health is perfect. What I want is to hear your version of Dr. Aker's murder."

Robbins' face hardened.

"I've told all I know to the police dozen times," he snapped shortly.

"But I'd like it first hand, if you don't mind. Believe me, Doctor. I wouldn't annoy you this way

if I didn't have an excellent reason for that request."

"All right," the big man grunted after a short silence. "But it's little enough, Dr. Wetherell and I were in the lab studying X-ray plates when Nurse Cantor came crying that Dr. Aker had collapsed while operating. Wetherell and I both hurried into surgery. I knelt to help Dr. Aker and saw the scalpel protruding from the costal cartilage of the fourth rib. There hadn't been enough blood to stain his gown, which probably accounted for no one having noticed it sooner. At the same time, Dr. Wetherell discovered Jonas Blunt was also dead, so we stayed by the bodies until the police arrived."

"Then you didn't see or meet the killer anywhere?"

"No, but he could have slipped into any of a number of doors along the hall. It was some time, remember, before we realized what had happened. Even then we weren't sure until an interne found Dr. Kyle lying unconscious in the linen room."

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Bad enough. A little harder would have fractured his skull. He was slugged with a heavy pyrex beaker."

The Black Bat frowned in perplexity. There was nothing in this straightforward story to indicate why an attempt to visit Dr. Robbins had nearly been Tony Quinn's death warrant. Yet the very fact that four men had been detailed to remove the blind man indicated that somewhere there was a connection that definitely menaced the killer's safety.

"You were intimate with Dr. Aker," the Black Bat said. "Did he give you any inkling, either in words or action, of something he had discovered—something so upsetting that it made him place an ad in the paper, begging for the Black Bat's aid?"

"What? Dr. Aker advertised for you? I never heard of such a thing. I can scarcely believe it."

"Nevertheless, it's true. He placed the ad just a few hours before he was murdered."

"It's shocking news to me, I did think he acted somewhat—well, strained, all day yesterday, but he gave no explanation."

THE Black Bat sighed regretfully. Robbins was obviously sincere, which ran his investigation against another absolutely blank wall.

"Who will replace Dr. Aker as chief of the surgical staff?" he probed, after a moment. "Is Dr. Kyle the logical man for the post, since he was senior assistant?"

Robbins stiffened and his lips thinned, The Black Bat thought he would refuse to answer.

"That matter," he snapped finally, "will be settled by that board in due time."

The Bat decided to try a new and more direct tack.

"Why," he asked coldly, "should a telephone call send you into such a rage that you start to rush out carrying a loaded gun? That seems a bit unusual for a physician of your repute."

It was a deliberate attempt to goad Robbins into a rage that would make him incautiously blurt something he might otherwise attempt to conceal. The Black Bat was by no means certain that the doctor had told everything there was to tell.

There was a moment of tense, electric silence. Then Robbins surged to his feet, his face livid.

"Get out!" he bawled in a choked voice. "Get out or I'll call the police! That phone call was my own personal affair and if catch you sticking your nose into it, I'll—"

The threat was never completed.

With a tinkling crash, an entire pane of the library window suddenly burst inward, showering the rug with glittering shards of glass. The Black Bat caught one swift glimpse of the weirdly expressionless features of the man he called Baby-face. Then the hood's hand came through the opening to level an automatic at Dr. Lawrence Robbins.

The Black Bat was standing well out of line with the window and deep in shadows that blended into his somber garb. Apparently Baby-face was totally unaware of his presence. If he had been watching through the window, he probably thought Robbins was either talking to himself or shouting at someone in another part of the house. His whole attention was centered on his frozen, helpless target. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The Black Bat's gloved hands crossed and uncrossed before his chest in a motion so smoothly swift as to be almost invisible. Two heavy guns seemed to appear in his hands out of thin air. They barked in unison. One sent a slug crashing into Baby-face's brain. The other smashed the desk lamp, plunging the room into inky darkness. Baby-face's gun crashed once, before it slid from lifeless fingers, but it was only reflex from dying nerves, and the bullet plowed harmlessly into the floor.

Dr. Rohbins recovered his wits, then, and snatched at the gun in his own pocket, but the sudden darkness prevented him from doing more than stumble away from the desk. He pressed back against the wall and waited tensely, squinting into the darkness and listening for any menacing sound. He was totally unaware that the Black Bat, to whose supersight there was no such thing as darkness, was keenly studying his every movement and facial expression.

THEN a sound outside sent the Black Bat streaking to the broken window. Again his keen eyes roved the darkness. Where a normal man would have seen nothing, his amazing vision picked out the knot of men rushing toward the

house as clearly as if they had been limned by a powerful spotlight.

His lips thinned as he saw five hard-faced thugs, each with a drawn gun. He recognized one as the fake cab driver who had trapped him earlier in the day. The others were of a similar type, petty but vicious criminals whose lust for murder was always for sale to the highest bidder. There was no mistaking the murderous intent behind their silent rush.

The Black Bat raked the remaining shards of glass from the window pane with a sweep of one pistol barrel and sprang out onto the terrace with guns blazing. One of the advancing thugs moaned liquidly and pitched to his face. The others yelled and scattered, covering their flight with a barrage of screaming lead. A moment later, the lawn was empty.

Pausing only long enough to reload and holster his guns, the Black Bat bent over the body of Baby-face, sprawled below the window. Here was his chance so find out whether that hideous blankness was the result of a skin-tight mask, clever makeup or some horrible travesty of surgery. Carol's report of a blank-faced man at the accident on South Highway gave the question more than mere casual significance.

The Black Bat's sensitive fingers prodded the dead flesh without feeling any trace of a mask. He turned the weird face to look for signs of makeup or the telltale scars of plastic surgery.

Suddenly his ears caught a faint squeal of brakes from the street. He whirled and stiffened at the sight of two squad cars, traveling with lights off and sirens muted, drifting to the curb. He could visualize McGrath in the lead car, tensed to leap out and corner his longtime enemy. The trick bore all the earmarks of McGrath's delicate touch.

A grim smile touched the Black Bat's lips and then faded. If he were to escape and prowl unchecked, he must regretfully forego any further examination of Baby-face. His gloved forefinger touched the waxy forehead and left a small black sticker on the dead flesh—the silhouette of a bat in flight, trademark of crime's deadliest enemy.

HE straightened and peered in the window. Dr. Robbins had left his place by the wall and was fumbling his way haltingly toward the window, still holding his pistol.

"You're safe enough now," the Black Bat said to him, and chuckled. "But I'm not. The police will be here in a moment. Careful, you're about it trip over a hassock, Doctor."

"What? How the devil can you see in the dark?"

"Never mind that now, Doctor, if you're truthful about having no conscious connection with the killer of Dr. Aker, your life will be in constant danger until the killer is behind bars. This attempt on your life should convince you I'm talking fact and not fancy, I'd suggest you forget the hospital for a few days. Check into some small hotel under an assumed name and stay there, taking your meals in your room, until the killer is caught."

"I—I guess you're right, and I do owe my life to you. I swear, I can't see why anyone would want to kill me, but apparently they do. I'll' take your advice, Black Bat."

Outside, the first of several converging squad cars was whimpering to a stop at the front. In a moment, the place would be swarming with police to whom the capture of the Black Bat would be a triumph.

"I'm glad you're sensible," the Black Bat said softly as he leaned through the broken window to reach something on the floor inside. "Make it the Nome Hotel, on Central Boulevard, and register as John Franklyn. In that way, I'll be able to contact you if that should become necessary."

Then he was gone, flitting across the lawn like a fugitive shadow, pausing only for an instant to touch a second Black Bat sticker to the forehead of the other thug he had shot.

CHAPTER VI
The Crime Storm Breaks

MOVING quietly down the dark residential street, the powerful sedan passed the brightly lighted mansion up the corner without slowing. The two thin-faced men in the front seat appeared only mildly interested in the lawn festival going on beside the big mansion. They showed but little more interest in the glistening limousines ranged along the curb, or the little knot of waiting chauffeurs who smoked and gossiped.

But as the sedan turned the corner and coasted softly past the unlighted side of the mansion, the driver spoke.

"So that's where old man Morgan, the oil king, hangs his socks at night, eh? I wouldn't mind throwin' a party in a dump like that myself. Only the party I'd throw wouldn't be like that—just a gang of doddering old wrecks standing around drinking punch." He gagged. *"Punch,* Chuck? Imagine that!"

"Yeah." The man called "Chuck" grinned. "And the way the boss has things ready to break in this town, you'll be owning a joint twice that big in two months. Boy, Scar, we'll be a couple of millionaires ourselves."

"If!" Scar said gloomily, his enthusiasm suddenly and strangely dampened.

"What do you mean, *if?*" Chuck demanded. "You gone nuts?"

"If that blasted Black Bat guy don't decide to take a hand in the game. The boss has got a set-up doped that'll have the cops running in circles and pinchin' each other, but the Black Bat is different. He ain't human."

"Shut up. you two half-wits!"

The harsh, command came from third man who was almost hidden in the shadows of the back seat. Then the stray beam of a streetlight touched his face to reveal features as smoothly regular as those of a painted mask. When he spoke, only the delicate lips moved, leaving the remainder of the weird face blank.

"Sure, sure, Pack," the driver said hastily and fearfully. "I won't shoot off my mouth again."

"Make sure that you don't," "Packy" snarled, "and you may be around when we line up to spit on the Black Bat's corpse. Now turn into Glenville and get going."

As the sedan swung onto the busier street, an old coach driven by an elderly man rattled past.

"He'll do," Packy snapped. "Get him at the next light."

Chuck slid a gun from inside his coat. As the two cars drew abreast at the stoplight, he opened the door and stepped across onto the running board of the old coach. His hand went in through the open window and shoved his gun into the face of the startled driver.

"Okay, Gramps," he growled. "This is a stickup. Turn off here and drive where I tell you, slow, and you might not got hurt. Come on. Move!"

Shaking with fright, the old man obediently turned onto the side street, hoping his vicious-looking passenger would be satisfied with the meager change in his pocket. But oddly, the gunman ordered him to drive on, turning again and swinging at last onto the street that ran beside the mansion of Morgan, the rich oil man.

THEN, opposite the Morgan estate, shielded from the house and the waiting chauffeurs alike by a high hedge, Chuck went into action. With callous brutality, he smashed his gun down onto the old man's defenseless head. In the same motion, he caught the wheel of the old car and leaned in far enough to jerk the dashboard throttle wide open. As the old car roared and lurched ahead, Chuck calmly twisted the steering wheel and then jumped off, darting away into the shadows.

The coach squealed across the street and leaped the curb. There was a rending crash as it drove into a tree.

A moment later, gasoline trickling onto the overheated old engine burst into lurid flame, enveloping the car and its unconscious burden.

A block away, Scar put the sedan into motion, chuckling with satisfaction.

"Went off like clockwork, Packy. Now I drop you, pick up Chuck and head to the meeting place, eh? Anything else?"

"Plenty else," Pack snarled. "Didn't you see that big, overgrown bird who looked like a prize-fighter lurking in Morgan's shrubbery when we drove past? You and Chuck bring him in and don't slip up. I want to know who he is and what he was doing there, before I finish him off. Now scram!"

CAROL was excited. Her blue eyes were slight with the fire of her enthusiasm as she darted into an empty drugstore and made her way to a telephone booth. After a quick glance to make sure she would not be overheard, she stepped inside and dialed quickly. A moment later Silk's precise voice reached her ears,

"Silk, is Tony back yet?"

"Not yet, Miss, but I—gather he's been active. Commissioner Warner just phoned, asking for him. When I said Mr. Quinn had retired, he laughed and hung up. But how did you make out with your—er—studies?"

"Wonderful, Silk. Is Butch still guarding Morgan's house?"

"Yes. He phoned a short time ago that nothing had occurred except some ants stung him when he was crawling through some bushes."

Carol laughed.

"Poor Butch! But if a fight starts. he'll take it out on somebody. Listen, Silk, I'll be in shortly. Tell Tony that I've been checking with market operators and the man Kroner is definitely a suspect. He appeared mysteriously about two months ago, rented a town house which he occupies with one servant, and seldom appears in public. His secretiveness and uncanny ability to pick winning stocks has a lot of people wondering. I've been posing as a staff writer on one of the business magazines and it's worked so well that I'm going to try for an interview with the mysterious Mr. Kroner himself."

"I wonder if that's safe," Silk protested. "If he's really responsible for these terrible murders—"

"Stop worrying, Silk," Carol said lightly. "You don't know how convincing I can be with my notebook and pencil. I'll simply ask a few ordinary questions, just for a chance to look the man over, and be home almost immediately. 'Bye."

SHE hung up on Silk's worried protest and hurried out. A few moments later she was turning in at the home of the mysterious and successful Mr. Kroner.

There certainly was nothing disturbing about the big house. Lights shone cheerfully from a number

of windows and an antique lantern above the front door spilled warm radiance out over the flagstone walk.

Carol rang the bell. Almost immediately she heard footsteps approach inside, and a tall, cadaverous butler in formal livery opened the door.

"May I see Mr. Kroner, please?" Carol asked, with her most winning smile. "Tell him Miss Harrison of the *Market Commercial Magazine* would like a piece of information."

"I'm sorry, Miss," the butler said, "but Mr. Kroner is not in this evening."

"Um-m-m." Carol frowned. "When would you suggest I might be able to see him? Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"I really can't say, Miss. Mr. Kroner makes frequent trips out of the city, as he did today, and I never know when he is leaving or when he will return. Mr. Kroner seldom sees callers, however, even when at home."

"Maybe you can help me," Carol said, after a moment's thought. "Our magazine is planning an anniversary issue and they want short biographical sketches of various market operators. I only need a few general facts."

The butler hesitated, then stepped back to let Carol enter a huge hallway.

"What did you wish to know, Miss?" he asked, closing the door. "I doubt if I can help, but—"

"Just routine questions." Carol flashed a smile intended to thaw the stiff, precise manservant as she drew out notebook and pencil. "Where was Mr. Kroner's home before he came here, what business was he in, why is he so reticent about appearing in public? Oh yes, and if you could give me just a sort of general hint on the method he uses to foretell the market movements so accurately."

The butler hesitated, while a faint frown creased his high, pale forehead. Then he bowed toward a doorway, down the hall.

"If you will step into the library, Miss, I'll be glad to give you what little help I can."

Carol obeyed with alacrity. Direct questioning would probably gain her little, but subtle probing might reveal a whole unspoken story to take back to the Black Bat.

Too absorbed in planning her questions to be suspicious, Carol stepped into the library. Then she stopped short, muffling a startled gasp.

She was facing a big desk, and a red-haired man who sat behind that desk was gently smiling at her. The soft smile was reassuring until Carol saw the man's greenish eyes. There was something stark and cold in those eyes that chilled her nerves.

"Come over, my dear," the red-haired man said softly. "I am Roger Kroner and your curiosity over my private affairs intrigues me. Who sent you here to spy on my activities?"

Carol's lips pressed tight. Something in that probing gaze told her it would be futile to attempt to continue her bluff. Her one desperate hope, now, was to escape and set the Black Bat on the trail of this smiling man whose eyes held the deadliness of a serpent. She had left her small automatic at home, but her slender fists were no mean weapons by themselves.

ABRUPTLY she whirled, intending to catch the gaunt butler by surprise The movement literally hurled her into the crushing embrace of an apelike thug who was creeping forward with long arms extended to seize her. Before she could move or cry out, her arms were pinioned and a big hand clamped over her mouth with crushing force.

The butler stood at one side, grinning evilly. Then Carol's heart sank still further as a third man appeared in the doorway—a big man whose face was as pale and blankly expressionless as a wax mask.

"Neatly done, Ape," Roger Kroner applauded and turned to the butler. "Ruffles, you did right in not letting her get away. Unquestionably she is a spy, either for the police or for the Black Bat."

For all her terror, Carol could feel a thrill at the way the gaunt butler winced when the Black Bat's name was mentioned. Kroner motioned for Carol to be dragged up to his desk.

"Now, my dear," he purred, "you will tell us who sent you here. Quickly, please. It will be far pleasanter—for you—if the information is given voluntarily."

The thug holding Carol moved his hand from her mouth so she could speak. But instead of answering, Carol darted her head forward and sank her teeth deep into his palm, kicking and fighting to break free.

But though Ape howled in agony as he jerked his gashed hand free, his grip did not loosen. The gaunt Ruffles dropped to one knee to pinion Carol's feet and the blank-faced man glided in, easing a stubby automatic into his hand.

"Say the word, Boss, and I'll make her talk!" Ape raged. "I'll make her glad to talk."

"Not here, Ape. Tie and gag her for ,the moment." Kroner turned to the blank-faced man. "Connie, when the reports are all in, take her to your meeting place and have Ape extract the desired information. If she is merely a police spy, dispose of her quickly. But if she reveals a connection with the Black Bat, contact me at the resort and we will arrange a trap for him."

A moment later as Carol, cruelly bound and gagged with strips of tape, was rolled into a corner,

the telephone rang. Kroner listened for a moment, grunted approval and turned, smiling.

"Number One successful," he reported. "Some two hundred thousand in gems from the Rockwood Jewelry, with the loss of only one man against two police and a watchman."

There were exclamations of triumph. Then, as Carol listened in growing horror, the telephone began to bring in a swift succession of reports. Burglaries, holdups, murders, two kidnappings. With each report the enthusiasm grew. Like a well oiled machine, an unbelievably ruthless crime army was systematically looting the city. Apparently the police were helpless before the ferocity of the attacks in scattered locations. Only two calls reported failure, due to police resistance.

Kroner rose at last, smiling with satisfaction.

"The first night has been successful beyond my expectations," he gloated. "Connie, you and Ape take the girl now for questioning. Ruffles, you remain here, as usual. Remove all traces of our presence so that if anyone comes looking for the girl, they can search the house if they insist."

He paused for a moment, smiling gently down at Carol's helpless form. "'I'm sorry I can't be present at your questioning, my dear, but my evening's work is only beginning. However, I am quite sure that, with his torn hand to spur him on, Ape can be depended upon to do a thorough job."

CHAPTER VII
The Bat Strikes Terror

WHEN the cleverly concealed red light in Tony Quinn's den flashed a signal that someone had entered the secret room from the tunnel, Silk's eyes lighted. He hurriedly drew the shades against possible prying eyes and pressed the hidden spring that opened the fireplace panel. The Black Bat was in the little room, just drawing a chair up to a laboratory bench that was covered with a bewildering array of crime detection instruments of every known kind.

"I'm only stopping for a moment," he said, as Silk joined him, "so give me the latest dope as I work."

"Right, sir. Butch phoned something over an hour ago to report nothing suspicious at Morgan's. Shortly afterward, Miss Carol called in and asked me to tell you that she's found many suspicious items about that man Kroner. She was going to Kroner's house, posing as a magazine writer after data for an article, and try to meet to meet him."

"What?" The Black Bat turned sharply. "Carol started to interview Kroner an hour ago and hasn't reported since? I don't like that, Silk. Such an interview might prove priceless, but it shouldn't take this long."

CAROL

"I've been worried, myself," Silk confessed. "I'd been hoping you'd come."

"I was going to join Butch at Morgan's," the Black Bat mused, "but I'll switch my plans. As soon as I finish this, I'll go have a look at the mysterious Mr. Kroner before I relieve Butch."

Silk breathed relief. He nodded toward the binocular microscope the Black Bat was adjusting.

"May I ask what that is you're doing?"

"Preparing to test this gun for fingerprints," the Black Bat explained and described his gun battle at the home of Dr. Robbins. "Men with odd, expressionless faces of one kind or another are playing increasingly prominent parts in this crazy drama. I was in hopes Baby-face's fingerprints on this gun might give me some clue. Twice, now, the police have interrupted me before I could make a thorough examination of his face. But I did learn that he wasn't wearing a mask, though I didn't get a chance to see if clever makeup created the weird effect."

The Black Bat bent to his work in silence. Then he straightened with a grunt of annoyance.

"Another stone wall," he said disgustedly. "There isn't a print of any kind on Baby-face's gun. He wasn't wearing gloves so the only possible answer is that his hands were coated with collodion. Silk, pour about an ounce of ether from that can into a tight bottle, one that I can carry without spilling. I may get another crack at one of those blank-faced men. If I do, a little ether will dissolve the collodion and give me all the fingerprints I want."

As Silk hastened to obey, the telephone in Tony Quinn's den rang.

"I'm asleep," the Black Bat ordered. "But if you think it's sufficiently important, I can be awakened."

Silk nodded and lifted the receiver. He listened for a moment and his face blanched.

"Just a moment, Commissioner," he choked. "Mr. Quinn would want to hear about that himself. He left word for me to call him if anything important developed. Please hold the line."

HE came hurrying into the laboratory, breathing hard.

"You'd better talk to Commissioner Warner, sir. Complete inferno seems to have broken loose."

Tony Quinn took his time moving. Then he went to the phone and mumbled a sleepy greeting.

"Tony, I had to talk to you." Warner's voice quivered with emotion. "The storm I've been waiting for has broken. Within an hour, separate gangs of thugs led by strangers with weird blank faces have looted banks and stores all over the city. The loot so far has been estimated at nearly two million dollars. Five police and a dozen civilians are dead, or dying. The gangs all struck simultaneously, which meant our men couldn't get to half the places in time."

"Any leads at all?" Quinn demanded tensely.

"Not a one. The devils killed without mercy, grabbed the loot and vanished into thin air. They used stolen cars for their getaway and shot down everyone who tried to follow. But we always found the getaway car abandoned a few blocks from the scene with no clue as to how or where they went from there. We shot one of the blank-faced leaders, but before we could grab the body his gang ran straight into our fire and sacrificed seven of their ordinary thugs to make off with the corpse. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Tony, there have been a dozen fatal auto smashups all over town. I'm half crazy, trying to get somewhere against this horror."

"You say only these queer-looking leaders are unknown to the police?"

"That's right. The rest of the gangs, the strong-arm mob, seems to be made up of every small-time thug and hoodlum in the underworld. We killed several and captured three, but the others risked their lives to cold-bloodedly murder those three prisoners, to make sure they didn't talk. I tell you, Tony, we've never faced such an utterly ruthless, fiendish organization in police history .... And by the way, Tony, John Bradney, the drug man, turned up tonight. He was found wandering in a daze, near the scene of one of those car wrecks downtown. He swears he can't remember a thing that happened after he left his office last night. But now Morgan, the oil man and Gilbert, the stock broker, have vanished!"

There was a film of cold perspiration on Tony Quinn's face as he turned from the phone a moment later. Part of it was due to the news of the horror that engulfed the city. But another reason turned his heart into a lump of ice. Butch was supposed to be guarding Morgan, but Morgan had disappeared and Butch had not reported.

And, with murder stalking the streets of the helpless city, Carol had apparently vanished, as well.

"Silk,"—the Black Bat's voice had never sounded so cold and grim— "there isn't a thing you can do yet but wait here and take calls. You'll either hear from Carol and Butch in a little while—or you will know that the Black Bat has followed his last trail."

CAROL had no idea where she was, whether in town or somewhere in the country. It had seemed hours that she lay blindfolded on the floor of a speeding car. Then she was roughly lugged into a building, past the mumble of many voices, the blindfold was jerked off, and she was unceremoniously dumped on the floor of a sparsely furnished bedroom.

The hood she had bitten stood over her for a moment, leering sadistically, before joining two other brutal-looking thugs who waited at the door. The three went out, slamming the door behind them, leaving Carol alone, cruelly bound and gagged.

After a few agonizing tugs at the confining cords, she gave up hope of freeing herself. From the next room came a burst of raucous and exultant laughter. Carol's heart sank with the growing surety that she was doomed. The Black Bat could never find her before that leering Ape returned to his task of torture. But one thought anchored itself ineradicably in her mind. No matter what they did to her, no matter how terribly she suffered, not one word of Tony Quinn or the Black Bat would pass her lips.

Abruptly the talk and laughter in the other room was stilled and a new sound reached her ears. It came from somewhere below and at first sounded like a cyclone striking the building. There was a weird undertone, a constant roaring that held a terrifying note. Above that sound came shrieks, yells and curses, interspersed with crashing thuds that made the floor tremble.

Carol heard a sudden rush of feet leaving the adjoining room. Then the riotous confusion below swelled in intensity for a few moments and was abruptly stilled.

She heard heavy feet tramping back up the stairs then, and a chorus of voices muttering in fury. The door of her prison was jerked open and a massive body was tossed on the floor with a jarring thud. The thugs withdrew, muttering curses.

Carol looked at the body on the floor and only the cruel tape plastered over her mouth prevented an involuntary outcry. It was Butch ... or what was left of him.

The big man's clothes hung about his massive body in rags and his huge face was made still larger by the puffy bruises that swelled over it. His hands and feet were lashed with cord. Carol looked at the terrible evidences of ruthless beating and tears welled into her eyes. Poor faithful Butch!

Then she stiffened incredulously. The mass of purpling flesh on the big face was stirring, wrinkling apart to reveal one of Butch's eyes wide open. The eye studied Carol for a moment, then moved in a gargantuan wink. A smile of complete happiness lingered for a moment over the mashed lips. Then the eye closed.

For a moment Carol thought the beating had driven Butch out of his head. Then the sound of a voice raised in feverish curses beyond the door suddenly revealed the cause of Butch's happiness.

"—unholy elephant ain't human!" the voice raged. "Four guys couldn't hold him when he started. Even after I busted a chair on his head, he kept fighting. Busted Crick's jaw, tossed Eddie through a window, and Weasel ain't come to yet. I never seen such a scrapper. Whyn't the boss let us plug the big moose and get it over with?"

"Use your head, Scar," another voice growled. "Him and the dame got some talking to do, first. For all we know, maybe one or both of 'em are hooked up with the Black Bat."

THE voices died to a mumble. The bedroom door suddenly opened and the blank-faced Connie came in, followed by Ape and three other thugs. One of them, whose ratty face was split by a hideous scar, was still mumbling as they entered the room.

"I'd like this game better if the Black Bat hadn't got in," he was saying. "When the boys start turnin' up with them black stickers on their foreheads, it's time—"

Connie, who had been staring down at Butch, turned slowly and a gun slid into his hand. He looked at Scar.

"The game getting too dangerous for you, Scar?" he asked softly.

"Aw," Scar mumbled, "you know what I mean, Connie. I—"

"Yes," Connie said pleasantly, "I know what you mean. You mean you've turned yellow and if you keep on whining, you'll have some of the other boys getting cold feet, too. So we'll relieve your mind right now."

He calmly shot Scar through the heart.

Not a man in the room stirred or breathed as the echoes of the shot died away and the body tumbled to the floor. Connie, his thin face as blank as a death mask, looked at the others.

"Anyone else bothered by cold chills? No?" He calmly turned back. "All right, leave Scar there until I've questioned these two. Then you can dump all three bodies in the same hole. Pick up the girl, Ape. Let's see you start persuading."

Ape stooped over Carol's helpless figure. Connie, still holding the flat automatic, stepped around to direct proceedings. The movement placed him with his back to Butch and only a scant two feet from the battered hulk that lay unmoving.

Then Carol saw a miracle occur. Butch's still form suddenly seemed to swell and writhe. There was a sharp snap and piece of cord flew across the floor. A hand shot out to close around one of Connie's ankles. There was a swift flurry of movement, then Butch was sitting up, clutching the squirming, cursing Connie before him as a shield and waving the blank-faced man's pistol.

"Hi!" he mumbled cheerfully, despite his swollen lips. "Anybody want to start something and end up alongside that lug on the floor, there?

You, monkey-puss, you're reaching for the lady on the floor so just keep on reaching and untie them ropes around her ankles and wrists. Then what do you say we all go downstairs and start hitting each other again? Boy, that was fun—even if you guys were a bunch of cream puffs."

CHAPTER VIII
Murder by Flame

RUFFLES, butler for Roger Kroner, was in a mellow mood. An hour before, the man Connie, whose expressionless face and cold cruelty made Ruffles secretly nervous, had gone to the meeting place, taking his two gunsels and the prisoners along. Furthermore, the vast crime scheme that was to make everyone connected with it, including Ruffles, unbelievably rich had swung into its first night's action like clockwork.

But best of all, a phone call had just informed him that Roger Kroner himself would not return that night. He was supervising some delicate detail of the monstrous crime pattern his wily brain had conceived.

It was this fact that gave Ruffles the greatest sense of relief. For the nervousness he felt in the presence of Connie was as nothing compared to the stark terror engendered in his craven soul by his mysterious master. Roger Kroner was s small man, with thin, stooped shoulders, and a thin, sallow face under a great shock of red hair. He carried no gun, never threatened and never blustered, but there was something in Kroner's pale greenish eyes that was like the cold touch of Death's dark wings. It was a silent promise of unmerciful punishment for any weakening or slightest failure.

But with Kroner gone for the balance of the night, Ruffles was at ease. Humming under his breath, he moved leisurely around the big kitchen, mixing himself a drink. With the finished product tinkling pleasantly in a tall glass, Ruffles strolled into the library, lit one of Roger Kroner's expensive cigars and stretched at ease in a deep chair, to dream of the wealth that was to be his share of the spoils.

The whirr of the telephone broke into his dreams. He set down his drink, frowned and lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Kroner's residence," he said smoothly.

"Is that girl there yet?" a curt voice demanded. "The one I sent to get Kroner's story for our magazine."

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. Kroner is out of town. The young lady you mention said she would call back another time."

"I hope you aren't lying to me. If you are—" The phone went dead.

Ruffles hung up slowly, frowning worriedly. He was fully prepared to have someone come there hunting for the girl. Not even a police search would find a thing amiss. That part did not bother him.

But why had the mysterious caller hinted that he might be lying? That did bother Ruffles, and the more he thought of it, the more worried he became.

The phone rang again. This time a high-pitched voice cried, without preamble:

"How does it feel, Ruffles, to loll at ease with good liquor and a good cigar while that poor girl is tortured and killed?"

Again the line broke with a click. Ruffles turned away dazedly and started to sit down. Abruptly he shot erect, eyes popping and jaw hanging slackly as the full import of the words seeped into his brain. The cigar fell unheeded from limp fingers.

Someone knew! The terrible knowledge seared his numbed brain. Someone was wise! He had to do something about it—warn someone. But the only phone number he knew was that of the meeting place. That was it. He would call Connie, let the cold-eyed killer handle the menace.

HE went back to the phone with his knees buckling. His trembling hand touched the instrument and then jerked back. Sweat poured down his face, and his breath wheezed agonizingly through slack lips. If he gave Connie the idea he had turned yellow....

No, his fear of Connie was greater than his fear of the unknown. He drew back reluctantly.

The phone rang again.

It was sheer torture to lift the receiver. But if the boss called and he failed to answer—

"Go ahead and call him, Ruffles," a cold voice said. "Why should you face the music alone? Why should you be found tomorrow morning with a black sticker on your forehead? Go on and call your boss."

"No!" Ruffles screamed the word. "No! He'd kill... Who are you, anyhow? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, Ruffles," the cold voice whispered. "I am the Black Bat!"

Whimpering in an agony of unbridled terror, Ruffles sagged to his knees, tears streaming down his quivering face. He had barely strength enough to lift the telephone again and finger the dial. He was afraid of the blank-faced Connie—but he was infinitely more afraid of the Black Bat.

Ruffles was totally unaware that cold, implacable eyes were following his every movement. A few scant yards away, across the dark-hallway and two doors down was the small den which Roger Kroner

had fitted up for an office in which to keep records of his legitimate stock market transactions. The Black Bat stood just inside this darkened room.

He was gazing intently out at a mirror down the hall, in whose surface he could see a clear reflection of the library and its terrified occupant. As Ruffles began to dial, the Black Bat whirled and sped unerringly through the darkness to another telephone in a corner of the den. He had already discovered, while boldly searching the house under Ruffles' very nose, that this phone was on a different line from the one in the library, it was, in fact, from this phone that he had made the mysterious calls that terrified the butler into making this hoped-for-break. His keen eyes had quickly sized up Ruffles as a type who might resist direct action, but would be likely to break under the strain of unknown menace.

The Black Bat lifted the receiver and dialed a short number. A voice answered almost instantly.

"Supervisor, please," the Black Bat said softly. "This is Captain McGrath of the Police Department. A phone call is being made at this moment from Brucewood nine-eight-five-six-three. Get me the name and address of the party being called as fast as you can."

The operator was back on the line almost instantly.

"Your party is calling a private home, listed under the name of Mercand, at twelve-ten Runnymede Road."

Despite the driving urge for haste, the Black Bat took the time to slip down the hall and snap off the library light. Then, under cover of the intense darkness, he darted across and touched a Black Bat sticker to the forehead of the cowering Ruffles. The terror those stickers inspired in the forces of evil was one of his strongest weapons and he had a feeling that before this case was closed he would need every weapon at his command.

TWENTY minutes later he parked the coupé on a dark side street, half a block from the rambling old house that was his goal. Light spilled around drawn shades at a number of windows in the house. In the driveway at one side, two cars were parked facing the street, dark and empty.

As the Black Bat hastily donned hood and cape and checked the clips of his twin guns before leaving the coupé, his pulse was racing. But in his heart was a grim prayer that Butch and Carol were in that house—and that he was not too late.

He left the coupé, slipped into the shadows—and froze. From the big house came a muffled thunder of shots and the faint sound of yells and curses. Then the front door burst open to erupt a dozen men, pounding frantically toward the parked cars. In the van were two whose mask-like faces marked them as leaders of the killer gangs. There were no signs of Butch or Carol.

The Black Bat snatched out his twin guns and raced toward the house. He was too far away to act when the leading car roared out of the driveway, but he hurdled the last hedge as the second car motor burst into sound.

The sight of the black-clothed apparition sailing down onto the gravel on the driveway with winged cape streaming out brought a chorus of frantic yells from the occupants of the car. Instantly a half dozen guns flamed. Lead plucked at the Black Bat's cape and whined a message of death past his ears. But a miracle, and the unbelievable speed of his leap into the shadows, saved him from death as the big car rocketed past.

Then his own guns were slamming and bucking in his hands. Where the thugs had only darkness in which to hit their target, the Black Bat's super-sight picked out every occupant of the car with sharp clarity. He saw two men in the back seat go down, blood streaming from their wounds. Another well placed shot made the driver slump over the wheel.

The big car hurtled out of the driveway with death at the wheel. It sped across the street, bounded over the curb and struck a stone wall with a rending crash. Only two figures leaped from the wreckage to flee. The Black Bat let them go. His interest was centered, now, on the house and the reason for the thugs' wild flight.

He raged up the steps and threw open the front door. Then he staggered back as a wall of roaring flame swept across the opening. The whole inside of the downstairs was a raging inferno that could only have come from gasoline, liberally used.

No human being could enter that first floor and live. The Black Bat turned and sped around the house, searching for some way of reaching the upper floor ahead of the flames. Suddenly a muffled shout reached his ears. He looked up—and his heart turned to ice.

The lights had gone out in the house when flames reached the wiring but this made no difference to the Black Bat's abnormal eyesight. As clearly as though it were high noon, be could see a second floor window covered with bars.

Behind those bars, almost obscured by billowing smoke, were the figures of Carol and Butch, waving and shouting.

Their voices came only faintly through the heavy window pane that was outside the bars. Butch evidently realized this, for the Black Bat could see him trying to wiggle a big hand through the bars to reach and smash the glass.

THE Black Bat shouted frantically and waved

As Butch let Carol down the rope, the Black Bat caught her.

his arms in an effort to stop the act. So far there seemed to be no flame in the room in which they were trapped, but the moment that glass was broken hot air rushing out would create a strong draft literally to draw the fire into the room.

But Butch was ignorant of that, and the roaring of the fire kept him from understanding the Black Bat's shouts. He stooped, snatched off one shoe and, poking it through the close-set bars, calmly smashed out the glass.

The Black Bat, searching futilely for a ladder or pole with which to reach the window, heard the tinkle of falling glass. He groaned as a pall of smoke gushed out through the opening and a lurid glare sprang up to silhouette the two figures.

There was not one chance in a thousand, now, of saving those two precious lives. Even if Butch's mighty muscles succeeded in tearing away the bars, as he was trying to do, the distance to the ground was too far for them to leap without serious injury.

There was exactly one chance in a thousand!

The Black Bat took it. Whirling, he vaulted the hedge and raced down the street at unbelievable speed.

Reaching the coupé, he kicked the powerful motor into life and sent the car hurtling toward the house that was now showing leaping flames. As he drove, he was jerking a coil of rope from behind the seat and tying one end to the door post at his side. He sent the coupé roaring up over the lawn and stopped it under the death-trap window.

Butch was pressed close to the bars, shielding Carol with his big body. The heat up there must be intense, for the whole room seemed a mass of flame.

The Black Bat leaped out, shouted to attract Butch's attention and hurled the coil of rope. It sped true, whipping up to strike the bars where Butch's fingers could capture it. The big man needed no advice as to how to use that rope. He swiftly lashed it to the bars and signaled. The Black Bat, under the wheel of the coupé, let out the clutch.

The coupé lurched ahead, slowed with spinning wheels biting at the lawn, then shot ahead. There was a rending crash as the whole framework of bars was torn from the window.

A moment later the free end of the rope shot back to the window, propelled by the Black Bat's powerful arm, and was made fast to a bed post. Butch let Carol down the rope, where the Black Bat caught her. When the two blistered, smoke-blackened figures half-slid and half-tumbled down the rope to the cool earth below, the Black Bat drew a deep, shuddering breath of relief. He helped Carol to her feet as Butch staggered erect, using the coupé's fender as a crutch.

"Boy, oh, boy!" the big man mumbled. "Let's go find some more guys to hit. I was just getting warmed up when seven of 'em jumped me with guns. I didn't have no Black Bat stickers—but I—sure—left—trademarks."

The Black Bat caught him as he slumped, senseless from exhaustion.

"You big lug." the man in black whispered affectionately.

CHAPTER IX
McGrath's Confusion

CAPT. McGRATH had driven his men the greater part of the night in a futile effort to run the killer gangs to earth. Twenty hours had passed for him without sleep and he was ready to drop from exhaustion and strain. When at last it became apparent that the gangs had vanished for the remainder of the night, he commandeered a prowl car and drove home to put his raging headache to bed.

The shrilling of the telephone jerked him out of his nightmares into the cold darkness that precedes the dawn. With the fear of new horrors gnawing at his heart, the grizzled officer swung his legs out of bed and groped for the phone.

"Captain McGrath," came the voice of a lieutenant he had left in charge of the division, "I thought you'd want to know about this. I hated to interrupt your sleep, after such a terrible night, but—"

"Want to knout what?" McGrath bawled furiously, groping along the table for the cold stub of his inevitable cigar. "Get on with it, you infernal idiot! What's happened now?"

"A fire, sir—out on Runnymede. Neighbors saw a big house in flames and called the Fire Department. We followed up the call, too, and directly across the street from the fire we found a wrecked car with four dead men in it. Three of them had been shot. They were all known crooks, men we knew had taken part in those raids tonight. And—each one had a Black Bat sticker on his forehead!"

McGrath shouted into the telephone until he was out of breath.

"—and throw a cordon around that whole district!" he finished his tirade. "I'll get that Black Bat this time for sure. Maybe with him out of my hair, I can concentrate on those dirty killers."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said. "Are you coming out here before we remove the bodies?"

"No!" McGrath shouted violently. "If that first alarm was just turned in, he couldn't get home from way out there inside of half an hour at best. You carry on out there. I'm going somewhere else and nail Mr. Black Bat right at the door of his den!"

He slammed up the phone and lunged at the pile of clothing on a chair beside the bed. His bare foot struck a table leg, which added more fuel to the fire of McGrath's temper and determination. This time he would not only see his arch-enemy behind bars, where he belonged, but he'd prove to the scoffers that Tony Quinn and the Black Bat were one and the same.

He finished dressing in seconds and raced for the prowl car, a crafty grin replacing the rage on his face.

"You've got two miles to travel, Mr. Black Bat," he muttered softly, "and I've got only a few blocks. Let's see you work your way out of trouble *this* time."

Two minutes later, the prowl car, running quietly and without lights, braked before the dark bulk of Tony Quinn's big house. Without stopping to switch off the motor, McGrath leaped out and raced up the walk. His left hand depressed and held the bell button. His right doubled into a ham-like fist that beat thunderously on the door.

"Open up!" he bawled. "This time I'll see for myself if Mr. Tony Quinn is peacefully tucked in his little bed."

Two blocks away, the Black Bat's sharp eyes spotted the unmistakable bulk of the prowl car in front of his house. Then he saw the lights spring up inside as Silk rushed downstairs. His lips thinned as the front door opened to silhouette the beefy figure of Captain McGrath, McGrath seemed to have one hand against Silk's pajama-clad chest, and, as the Black Bat watched, the officer shoved Silk aside and strode purposefully into the house.

Carol clutched his arm.

"Tony, what can you do? Captain McGrath will race right upstairs and find you gone and your bed not even slept in. This means the end!"

"There's nothing to do but race for the tunnel and pray," the Black Bat said grimly. "Our fate is in Silk's hands, now. But I don't see what he can do."

He sent the coupé streaking around the corner toward the gatehouse that marked the entrance to the tunnel.

At that moment, the staggering Silk was panting frantically. "You can't go upstairs, Captain! The master was awake until all hours, pondering over those crimes. He's just gone to sleep at last and I won't have him disturbed."

"Oh, yeah?" McGrath pounded toward the stairs. "I've fallen for that gag too many times before. If he could sleep through all the racket I made just now, he won't wake up when I tiptoe in and make sure Tony Quinn really is asleep in that bed."

"But you have no right to break in here without a warrant!" Silk cried angrily.

"Is that so, wise guy?" McGrath roared triumphantly, waving a folded paper. "Well, I just happen to have a search warrant, Brother. Been carrying it a long time for a chance like this. Now if you

make one phony move, I've got a right to smack you down for interfering with the police."

He leaped toward the stairs and stopped so abruptly that he nearly tumbled over his own feet. From outside, a gun slammed thunderously. Glass shattered and showered down over McGrath from a window on the landing halfway up the stairs.

As McGrath stood frozen, the gun roared again and a slug ripped plaster from the stair wall overhead.

"Down, sir!" Silk cried frantically. "Get down! Someone is shooting at you from outside. I saw the flash of the gun from those bushes by your car."

Captain McGrath was bull-headed and not too quick of wit but he was in no sense a coward. With a bellow of anger he snatched out his gun and raced back to the front door, plunging out onto the dark lawn.

"So somebody wants to play rough, do they?" he raged. "Well, I'll teach 'em they're playing with an expert."

He pounded straight at the clump of bushes and spent a futile minute beating around for signs of the gunman, But whoever had fired the shots was nowhere to be found, McGrath turned toward the house—and a bull-like yell of sheer frustrated fury burst from his lips.

LIGHT was on in a bedroom upstairs and in its radiance, McGrath could see Tony Quinn, clad in pajamas and with his brown hair rumpled, tugging at the window. It slid up and Quinn leaned out.

"Silk!" he called anxiously. "Silk, why don't you answer when I call? Is anything wrong? I thought I heard gunshots."

"A trick!" McGrath cried hoarsely, and raced for the house. "I fell for another of his tricks!"

He ran up the stairs and burst into the bedroom where Silk was solicitously leading Tony Quinn back to a rumpled bed. A muttered apology rose to McGrath's lips and was suddenly drowned in a cry of triumph. He nearly knocked Silk and Tony Quinn over as he sprang across the room.

Thereon the floor in a corner of the bedroom, lay a crumpled mass of black cloth. From one corner of the heap protruded a strip that was definitely and unmistakably ribbed.

"I've got you this time, Black Bat!" McGrath cried, and snatched at the cloth. "You slipped in when I fell for that shooting trick, but you didn't have time to get rid of your Black Bat costume. It's going to put you—"

He broke off, his big jaw sagging, and a wave of crimson washing up over his pugnacious face. For a moment he could do nothing but stare foolishly at the wreckage of a torn and broken black umbrella he held in his hands.

"Is that you, Captain McGrath?" Tony Quinn asked excitedly. "Were you shooting at someone? For goodness sake, have pity on a helpless blind man and tell him what on earth is going on. Is that my umbrella I hear rustling? I broke it tonight, which is what I get for opening it in the house. It's supposed to be bad luck. Do you believe in bad luck signs, Captain McGrath?"

McGrath shouted: "Gah!" which was the only sound he could push out through his rage. He stamped to the door, paused long enough to shake a trembling fist in front of dead, blank eyes that never wavered. and stormed out.

Neither Quinn nor Silk moved until the front door had banged violently, followed a moment later by the roar of a car engine in the street. Then they turned and fell on the bed, side by side, to bury their faces in the bedclothes while their shoulders jerked to spasms of muffled laughter.

"Silk, you're priceless," Quinn choked, wiping streaming eyes. "That umbrella gag was a beauty. But how on earth did you work those gunshots? I thought I was a goner until they decoyed McGrath outside long enough for me to slip upstairs and get into my pajamas."

"Well, you see, sir, I've been afraid all evening that the captain might try something drastic. Finally I took one of your spare guns and tied it to a tree outside, aimed where it couldn't possibly hit anyone. A cord from the trigger in through that window by the front door enabled me to fire the gun even with the captain watching me. But I'm afraid it worked at the expense of a new window and some patching plaster, sir."

"Don't worry about that, Silk. It was worth it. Let's go down to the laboratory and tell Carol and Butch. They could use a good laugh and there are few enough of them in this grim game of ours."

CHAPTER X
Disappearing Doctor

EXCEPT for minor burns, Carol was her old radiant self when the four gathered for a secret session in the laboratory the next afternoon. Butch, however, despite applications that had materially reduced his bruises, was still the worse for wear. His big knuckles were crisscrossed with tape and his face resembled something that belonged between slices of bread, but he had lost none of his enthusiasm and unfailing good humor.

"Boy, oh, boy!" he rumbled, caressing his knuckles. "Did we have a big night!"

"Too big, I'm afraid"—Carol frowned—"for what we gained. Tony, I'll never forgive myself for

walking into that trap and making you waste a whole night getting me out."

"Butch did most of the rescuing," Quinn assured, and smiled. "And don't blame yourself for anything but almost giving me heart failure. Don't forget, your nerve supplied us with positive proof that Roger Kroner is the brains behind the crime wave, and that's a major accomplishment."

"But not much help," Carol persisted. "Kroner apparently only used the house for an occasional front and now that the Black Bat has been there, he'll likely abandon it. Are you going to dig deeper into Kroner's past?"

Quinn shook his head.

"I believe that prior to two months ago, no such person as Roger Kroner existed, Carol. It is too incredible to believe a total stranger could, in two short months, organize a crime scheme of such gigantic proportions and collect such an intimate acquaintance with local businesses and institutions, as well as the local underworld. I'm convinced, from what you have told me, that Kroner is only the assumed personality of someone well known in town who has been laying the foundations of this coup, perhaps for years."

"You mean someone we know in disguise?" Carol gasped, her red lips parting in astonishment.

"We may know him, or we may not—as yet. But I'm sure he is disguised. The distinguishing feature of his appearance, as you described them, could all be easily assumed. Makeup for his face, a red wig, and eye-caps to give his eyes a green cast would make even Butch almost unrecognizable. You say Kroner was a small, slight man, but even that could be a deception. It's surprising how a large man can make himself appear puny by hunching his shoulders and wearing the right clothing and makeup."

"But, Tony, he could he any one of a million men."

"Just about," Quinn admitted grimly. "For the first time in our career we don't have a tight little circle of suspects from which to pick the guilty man, though I think we'll narrow our own circle considerably before long. The first murder, that of Dr. Aker, was committed by someone with enough medical training to step into a surgery routine without being conspicuous. My experience at Carron Hospital seems to strengthen the possibility of a medical tie-in."

"How about this Dr. Robbins who acted so queerly, Tony?"

"Frankly, I don't know, Carol, and it's much too early even to guess on the basis of the little we know. But I will say that Dr. Robbins is hiding some pretty grim secret, and he's about the right build to adopt a disguise like Kroner's. That murder attempt by Baby-face and his gang was almost too convincing to be staged, yet we're dealing with a clever criminal. No, we need a lot more information before we can start sifting suspects .... Butch, let's hear everything that happened to you between the time you phoned Silk and the time you bobbed up to save Carol. Don't neglect a single apparently unimportant item. Any little thing might suddenly tie some pieces together."

BUTCH squirmed a little uncomfortably before he answered.

"Aw, I was a chump," he growled sheepishly. "After I phone Silk, I go back to watching that lawn party like you told me, sneaking around in the bushes so them chauffeurs out in front won't spot me. Then some poor devil smashes his car and burns up in it, right on the side street by the house."

He paused to wave a disgusted hand, "When the ambulance comes, I figure I can join the mob without being noticed. But right away two guys jam guns in my back and whisper for me to ease off and follow them to their car, down the street. I'm ready to start taking them apart when one of 'em slugs me and I wake up pushing my face into the floor of the car. I keep quiet and hear one of them say that Morgan has been snatched and taken to the resort for treatment—whatever that meant."

"Resort for treatment," Quinn frowned. "If we knew what that means, we might have the answer to everything. Go on, Butch."

"Well, I go to work on these guys when they try to drag me into that house. It's a pretty good scrap while it lasts, but more guys keep jumping me faster than I can knock 'em out. Finally they conk me with a piece of gas pipe and heave me in that room with Carol. When that Ape guy starts for her, I bust loose and sort of take over."

He paused and a frown creased his battered face.

"But, Boss, I never saw guys so scared of anybody as they were of that big guy with the frozen face. Here I was covering them with a gun, yet one word from him and they jump me barehanded and snatch him loose, even though I plugged two of 'em. Then they locked us in there and you know the rest."

Quinn's lips tightened, "I know the rest."

He had heard Carol's story on the ride home the night before and now he quickly acquainted them with his own activities.

"But our big job," he finished, "still is to get close to one of those blank-faced lieutenants. The more I hear the more convinced I am that they hold the solution to everything. Maybe the police got the answers from Baby-face's body. Of course I can't give myself away by asking, but if Warner doesn't tell me about it soon, I'm afraid the Black Bat will have to invade Police Headquarters itself for the information."

"It seems to me, sir," Silk said, shaking his head, "that we're gathering an enormous mass of loose ends that don't tie together."

"We are," Quinn admitted, "but a surprising number of them *have* formed a pattern. That first horrible wreck out on South Highway not only introduced the first of the blank-faced killers, but also, inaugurated a whole epidemic of car wrecks whose deeper purpose we haven't yet penetrated.

"My attempt to investigate Dr. Aker's murder ties in through the baby-faced killer, and the prison break was obviously to free certain criminals needed in the crime scheme. Then Carol's investigation has tied the kidnapping of Bradney, the drug man, and the market raids of Roger Kroner into the same pattern."

"You're right, Tony," Carol said excitedly. "I didn't realize how much progress we've made."

"We'd make more," Quinn said grimly, "if we knew who and where Roger Kroner is, who murdered Dr. Akers and why, the secret of those men with blank faces, and what mystery Dr. Robbins is concealing. Which reminds me, Silk, get the Nome Hotel on the phone, will you? I've thought of a few more questions I'd like to ask Dr. Robbins."

A MOMENT later he was asking the hotel clerk to connect him with the room of John Franklyn, the name he had told Robbins to use when registering.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Franklyn checked out about nine o'clock this morning."

"What?" Quinn was genuinely startled. "Did he leave any message or say where he was going? Was anyone with him?"

"Well, really, sir—" the clerk's voice grew frigid.

"This is the Police Department," Quinn interrupted sternly, with just the right ring of authority in his voice. "If you cooperate, I may be able to keep the hotel's name out of this."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. sir," the clerk's voice thawed instantly at the veiled threat of scandal involving the hotel. "The gentleman was alone when he checked out, and he left no message or forwarding address."

Quinn cradled the phone and sat frowning at the wall.

"What's wrong, Boss?" Butch demanded. "Somebody you want me to take a poke at, maybe?"

"I'm almost tempted to say yes," Quinn growled. "I don't like this new development at all. Robbins went there at my advice, because his life was in danger. Now he's checked out without a word."

He riffled through the directory and hurriedly phoned Carron Hospital. No, the operator informed him, Dr. Robbins was not in, and had phoned that morning to say he might be gone several days. Quinn hung up, baffled.

Then a whirr of the doorbell sent him racing to his chair by the fire, to stare blankly into space as Silk ushered in a haggard Commissioner Warner. Carol and Butch waited in the secret room.

"Congratulations, Tony," Warner sighed, dropping into a chair. "You and Silk certainly pinned McGrath's ears back this morning. But watch your step. He's out for blood."

"I'm sorry—now." Quinn smiled. "It was cruel to bait him when he's so worked up over these crimes. But tell me, Commissioner, have you made any progress at all on the case?"

"Not an inch," Warner groaned, tugging at his silvery hair. "The killers and their loot simply vanished. They're somewhere in the city, because I had the state police throw an air-tight cordon around the whole area, but we haven't found a trace of their headquarters or them.

"Oh, we got a few minor rats, with the compliments of the Black Bat, and found one of their gathering places in flames, hut that got us exactly nowhere, The loot, now estimated at close to two and a half million, is evidently at their central headquarters that we can't locate. The worst of it is, I'm almost certain they'll strike again tonight, but I don't know where and I can't begin to cover all possible objectives."

"What about those odd-faced leaders you mentioned last night? Tell me more about them, Commissioner."

"I wish I could, Tony, but we've never even come close to one, dead or alive. Apparently the whole gang is sworn to keep even their corpses out of our hands."

Quinn suppressed a start of surprise.

"But you said the Black Bat left some bodies—"

"Only of the little, undisguised rats. Apparently not even the Black Bat can get close to those blank-faced leaders. Last night a Dr. Robbins claimed the Black Bat killed one to save his life, but he must have been mistaken. The police, searched his whole place and found only one body—that of a small-time thug named Borcher, who had a Black Bat sticker on his forehead."

TONY QUINN'S brain was reeling. He had left the body of Baby-face in plain sight under Robbins' window, yet in the few seconds it had taken the police to cross the lawn, the body had vanished. Why? What was the jealously guarded secret of those blank-faced, killers?

None of their part in the crime scheme made sense. Normally, crooks bent every effort to remain inconspicuous. Why, then, should these killers be so marked that their identity could never be concealed? Certainly not to make them inspire terror in their victims.

That purpose was much better accomplished

through their utter ruthlessness in killing everyone who crossed their paths.

And why did the crooks risk everything to make sure not even the dead body of a blank-faced leader should fall into the hands of the police? Obviously those weird faces held a direct clue to the leader of the mobs. But what could it be? Was it the identity of the fiends so masked, or was it the method of achieving the eerie effect? If it was neither, the Black Bat's deductions so far must be entirely wrong.

He had been, until that moment, almost certain that the blank-faced killers were none other than the missing big-shot criminals who had either fled prison or had vanished from their usual haunts. And he had been equally sure that some ghoulish type of plastic surgery was responsible for their lifeless faces, even though he had been unable to see any characteristic scars to denote a face-lifting operation.

But if those guesses were correct, there was no conceivable excuse for concealing the bodies.

Quinn's attention snapped back to the present as Warner rose wearily and laid a heavy, tired hand on his shoulder.

"I've got to run along, Tony. Phone me if you get any ideas at all, no matter how fantastic, This whole case is already so fantastic that you could tell me those killers were men from Mars and I'd listen to you with a straight face. I'm stumped and I'm past caring who knows I'm licked."

CHAPTER XI
The Black Bat's Bereavement

QUINN barely waited for dusk before he jerked off his baggy tweeds and donned the accoutrements of the Black Bat. For the last hours of daylight, he had paced the floor in a fever of impatience that presaged a night of action.

"I'm afraid for you tonight, Tony," Carol told him soberly. "Promise, you won't take unnecessary risks. Remember how I feel—how we all feel. And remember, too, that crime will go on. If people are to be freed from its shackles, the Black Bat must go on, too."

A warm smile drained the tension lines out of Quinn's face. He took Carol's hands in his.

"I promise—and I'll exact the same promise from the rest of you. No life is safe until this vicious ring is completely smashed. Silk, your job tonight is to find the reason for those car wrecks all over town. Disguise yourself and cruise in the sedan with the radio tuned to police calls. When you hear an accident report, rush there and watch for anything suspicious. And, Silk—keep a gun in your lap and use it if anyone tries to involve you in an accident. Also, if you stumble onto a mob in action, stay clear."

"If those are orders, sir," Silk promised reluctantly.

"They are. You'll get your share of action after we've whittled down the odds against us .... Carol, your job is one I hope will keep you out of danger, which isn't so easy now that the gang has seen you and associated you and Butch with me. I want you to visit the library and newspaper morgues for a history of every doctor on Carron Hospital's staff."

"Whew!" Carol grinned impishly. "Dat's a pow'ful task, Massa Simon Legree. But you shall have it. But why Carron Hospital, Tony?"

"Two pieces of our puzzle point there—murdered Dr. Aker and the disappearing Dr. Robbins. I'm sure that's more than mere coincidence. But, Carol, don't go near the hospital itself. Someone there plays too rough. Also, wear that raincoat with the hood that hides your face. Some of that mob might be cruising around."

"Hey, Boss!" Butch demanded. "Don't I get any laws to poke tonight?"

"We'll see. You're chauffeuring me for awhile."

"That's good enough for me," Butch grinned. "If I'm with you, there'll be action."

JOHN Bradney, propped in his bed, turned harassed eyes on the papers in his shaking hands and groaned. One was the latest newspaper financial page, the other a new Bradney Drug financial statement. Neither held anything to relieve his raging headache during the twenty-four hours that had been so completely blanked out of his life, so much Bradney stock had changed hands that the whole balance of power was upset.

He turned to pick up another paper—and froze. For a moment only his bulging eyes could move, following the shadow of great ribbed wings that drifted across his bedroom wall.

"Don't be alarmed," a quiet voice said. "I'm not here to harm you, Mr. Bradney."

Bradney forced himself to turn and face the black-clad apparition and began to breathe again. Despite its ominous appearance, the figure's eyes were reassuring.

"YOU—you're the Black Bat!" Bradney choked. "I've heard of you. What do you want with me?"

"Some information." The Black Bat smiled, seating himself on the edge of the bed. "Tell me all about your kidnapping."

"That won't take many words," Bradney smiled wryly. "I remember leaving the building and starting toward my car. Then something pricked me in the neck and the next thing I remember was the

police telling me I'd been missing twenty-four hours. The period in between is a total blank, except for one vague snatch of a dream."

"Dream?" the Black Bat asked sharply. "Tell me about that."

"Oh, it was just a fragment of nightmare, caused by some drug I'd been given. Or so the police doctor told me. Anyhow, all I remember is a hazy impression of lying in bed, telling some total stranger all my business secrets."

"Plans for your stock market operations?"

"Yes. That's why I know it was a dream, because I wouldn't tell that to my own family."

"Tell me," the Black Bat said, after a moment's thoughtful silence, "do you supply Carron Hospital?"

"They're one of our big customers. In fact, Dr. Robbins, one of their staff physicians owns a large block of Bradney stock, though that isn't generally known, I wish I could help you, Black Bat, but I—"

"You have helped me—more than you realize."

The Black Bat rose and moved back to the wall. A flick of his finger plunged the room into darkness. Then his quiet voice came again, this time from the opposite aide of the room, though how be could cover that distance so swiftly without stumbling over furniture was beyond Bradney's comprehension.

"Thank you, Mr. Brad—"

He was interrupted by the sharp clamor of the telephone beside the bed. Through the darkness, he could see Bradney's face wrinkle in puzzled surprise.

"Now, who the devil could be calling me?"

"If you don't mind," the Black Bat said softly, "I'd like to take that call. If it turns out to be a personal matter, I assure you I'll hand it to you at once."

Without waiting for permission, the Black Bat lifted the receiver. Then he almost dropped it as his sharp ears identified the speaker's voice with the first word.

"Bradney? Pardon my breaking into your privacy like this but I'd like to see you for five minutes on a matter of importance. This is Dr. Robbins. Will you be home for a little while?"

"Yes," the Black Bat answered instantly, disguising his voice. "Come right over."

"Good, I'll be there inside of twenty minutes, John. Do me a favor and answer the door yourself, will you? I don't want anyone else to see me or learn that I'm there. I'll explain when I see you, but believe me, it's a matter of life and death."

The Black Bat hung up after giving his promise. His lips twisted for a moment in a tight smile. The man who answered that call had promised to open the door in person. That was a promise that would be kept, but keeping it might hand the elusive Dr. Lawrence Robbins something of a shock.

THE Black Bat quickly relayed the substance of the call to the wondering Bradney.

"Since I'm anxious to talk to Dr. Robbins myself," he finished, "I took the liberty of inviting him here."

"Of course, But I can't understand it. As I told you, Robbins owns considerable Bradney Drug stock and we're personally friendly to the point of calling one another by our first names. But I can't imagine what he could want to see me about, or why he should act so mysterious."

"Perhaps we'll soon learn," the Black Bat said quietly. "Please stay here in bed until I return. I'd like to answer the door myself, if you don't mind."

A moment later the Black Bat stood in the darkened hall, peering out through the glass of the front door. He could see the coupé where Butch waited, parked inconspicuously up the street. He would have liked to contact the big man and acquaint him with this new development but dared not risk showing himself in the neighborhood or leaving his post unwatched. There were too many suspicious elements about the mysterious phone call to suit the Black Bat.

Less than five minutes had elapsed when the Black Bat's sharp ears caught the scrape of a stealthy footstep on the flagstone terrace. One gloved hand stole toward his holstered gun. The street in front had been in clear view for a block in either direction, but there had been no sign of an approaching figure. Whoever crept so stealthily toward the door must have slipped around from the dark alley at the rear.

There was a sudden sharp peal of the doorbell. Simultaneously, the Black Bat heard the stealthy footsteps race away across the lawn. His eyes smoldered at the unmistakable evidence of a death-trap set for the unsuspecting John Bradney. Flattening himself against the wall beside the door, the Black Bat drew one gun and reached out to turn the knob.

Then a groan tore from his lips. At the moment his gloved hand closed over the doorknob, he saw a door of the coupé burst open and Butch's huge figure came hurtling out. With his head down and both hands swinging, the big man came pounding across the street, straight toward the house.

The Black Bat's first thought was that Butch had seen the trap and was racing to sacrifice himself to save the Black Bat, Then, in the same heart-beat, he realized that more likely Butch was entirely unaware of danger at Bradney's door and was consumed only with some grimly urgent need to reach the Black Bat.

But either way the big man was racing straight into almost certain death of some kind. There was no time to lose. Whirling, the Black Bat seized an

overcoat hanging in a small coat closet at his back, jerked open the front door and tossed the limp coat out onto the stoop.

The dark coat flew out, looking at first glance like the figure of a man leaping through the door. At the same instant, the Black Bat dropped flat to the floor and peered around the door jamb.

A THICK clump of shrubbery came into his range of vision, shrubbery from which lances of crimson flame and the clatter of a submachine-gun erupted. Lead screamed over the Black Bat's head, thudding into the walls and ripping great splinters from the door.

The Black Bat's gun thundered twice and the rattle of the machine-gun stopped abruptly. A man came crashing out of the shrubbery with the weapon in his arms, took a reeling step and fell, to lie motionless. The Black Bat waited tensely, his gun poised, while his keen sight probed the tangle of bushes in search of other enemies.

In the middle of the street, Butch had plowed to a startled halt at the first burst of firing. When the roar of the Black Bat's gun told him his friend was alive and in action, he whirled and plunged back for the coupé. He had almost reached it when a single shot smashed from the shrubbery.

In the doorway, the Black Bat was just leaping to his feet when the unexpected shot came. He saw Butch stumble and pitch to his face. A groan burst from the Black Bat's lips as the big figure lay ominously still and limp beside the coupé.

Then a burst of fury seized the Black Bat. With both guns in his gloved hands, he leaped through the door and raced straight toward the concealing bushes. The hidden sniper saw the black-clad figure and whirled to fire again. The Black Bat could not see the hidden figure but his sharp eyes saw the movement of the bushes that marked his position. Both guns blazed in unison, bracketing the patch of shrubbery.

The sniper screamed and flopped into sight. Simultaneously, guns blazed from the rear of the lawn and death plucked at the Black Bat's streaming cape. He whirled and saw a big sedan parked in the alley, with two men firing at him from the lowered windows. The two believed their location and movements concealed by the pitch darkness and were taking their time in aiming at the black-clad figure.

To the Bat's super-sight, every detail of the ambush was clear. He saw a rat-faced man behind the sedan's wheel, and behind him a second man whose face was dead and blank. The Black Bat's lips thinned. Here was a chance to avenge Butch and get one of the blank-faced killers at the same time.

Both guns bucked in his hands. The blank-faced man in the back seat dropped his gun and clawed at a shattered arm. The man in front was stunned when half the windshield dissolved in his face. Instantly the Black Bat was racing toward the car.

But the driver recovered from his shock, stimulated by the fearsome sight of the black apparition, and thought only of escape. The motor roared into life and the sedan leaped forward under the impetus of the driver's terror.

The Black Bat stopped and raised his gun to take careful aim at the driver. Far more than mere vengeance depended upon his capturing that blank-faced man in the back seat. Dozens of human lives were at stake.

The Black Bat's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun as the head of the fleeing driver swam into line with the sights. Then a deep groan choked in the Black Bat's throat, and he dropped the gun unfired. His shoulders slumped and his eyes closed, shutting out the sight of the safely escaping sedan.

For in that single brief instant before firing, the Black Bat had glimpsed the license plates of the killers' car. It was his own sedan, the one in which Silk had been seeking a clue to the epidemic of fatal accidents.

Silk was either dead or in the hands of the most ruthless killers the city had ever seen.

The presence of the car in the hands of a blank-faced mob lieutenant proved that.

But the one thin chance that Silk was still alive and a prisoner, bundled helplessly on the floor of that car, had stopped the Black Bat from risking a shot at the elusive, lurching target.

By not firing, he had perhaps spared Silk the fate of death from a stray shot. But he had, by that same action, lost his one chance of tracing the headquarters of the deadly pack. Pursuit was useless. The Black Bat himself had had that car equipped with the fastest and most powerful engine in the country.

CHAPTER XII
Death and Destruction

IT was early evening when Silk started his lone patrol of the city streets. In his disguise as a staid, middle-aged business man, he cruised aimlessly through business and residential districts, studying both cars and pedestrians with a sharp eye.

Silk also kept a close watch in his own rear-view mirror for signs of pursuit, but apparently his wanderings aroused no suspicion. An hour passed without event. Silk saw nothing suspicious nor did the radio, tuned to the police band, report any accidents. He began to wonder if the killers might not have completed operations the preceding night and were

lying low. After all, two and a half million dollars was not a bad haul for one night's depredations.

Suddenly the radio burped to life and Silk stiffened at the announcer's words.

"Attention! Cars Eighteen and Twenty-six, go to Pine and Jackson. An accident, Signal Nine, Repeating—an accident. Signal Nine."

Silk's blood raced and a sharp flame of excitement came into his eyes as he trod down on the gas pedal. In the code of the local police, Signal Nine meant, "Keep your guns loose and be careful. There is something suspicious about this call."

He heard the whimper of a siren as a nearby squad car started to respond to the call. Silk headed for the scene of the accident, four blocks away. He heard another siren of a car converging from the east as he swung onto Pine and saw the crowd gathering some distance ahead.

Silk parked as near the scene of the accident as he could without having the sedan inextricably jammed in, slid the Black Bat's gun into his pocket and set out on foot. Sliding expertly through the gaping crowd, he reached a point where he could clearly see the tangle of wood and metal in the center of the intersection.

"What happened?" he asked a wide-eyed bystander.

"Some guy drove right through the red light, going about forty, and smashed into a car full of kids. Too much to drink, or crazy, I guess. That's him laid out under that blanket over there. Dead, most likely. If he ain't, he oughta be, the dirty baby-killer."

Silk squirmed his way to where the streetlight and spotlights on the police cars illuminated the wreck. At one side lay the blanket-covered corpse of the death-car driver. Across the little cleared space, police and bystanders were giving first aid to three battered figures. Silk circled the wreck, keeping eyes and ears open. without discovering any basis for suspicion.

He paused beside the covered corpse, fingers itching to jerk the blanket aside for one quick look. But he dared not risk making himself conspicuous. Then his eyes lighted, at the birth of an idea.

Silk contrived to catch one foot in the blanket, as if by accident, and drag it completely off the body. He whirled, looking shocked, and bent down to replace the covering. Meanwhile, his sharp eyes took in every detail of the body.

He saw an unfamiliar, middle-aged face that was bruised and bloody from the wreck. Then his eyes drifted down to the dead hands and he stiffened.

PLAIN across the back of each hand were gummy crisscross marks where adhesive tape had been recently removed. Such marks could only mean that the man at Silk's feet had been dead or unconscious, his lifeless hands taped to the steering wheel of the car, when it hurtled through the intersection.

Murder! Another staged wreck. But whoever engineered the accident had rushed in to remove the telltale tape before the crowd collected. That thought awakened Silk to his own danger. Hastily he started to replace the blanket,

"Hey, you!" An angry policeman ran forward, waving his arms. "Get away from that body! What's the big idea?"

"I'm sorry, Officer," Silk murmured contritely. "It was an accident. My foot caught in the blanket."

"Well, get back where you—"

The policeman's eyes fell on the hands of the corpse, clearly revealed in the glow of a spotlight. His eyes widened.

"Slocum!" he bawled at a fellow-officer. "Come here! We missed something when we hauled this one out. He's been ... *Ah-h-h-h-h!"*

Silk, who had been surreptitiously drifting sway from the unwanted attention, whirled and went cold. The policeman was sagging to his knees, clawing at the crimson-stained hilt of a knife that suddenly protruded from his throat.

Instinctively, Silk turned to stare in the direction from which the knife must have come. For one frozen moment he was staring straight into a pair of the most malevolent blazing eyes he had ever seen, eyes that were looking straight at him over the heads of the crowd. The owner of those eyes was some twenty feet away, across the cleared space, but even at that distance Silk could see that his thin face was as smooth and expressionless as a wax mask.

Then the crowd swirled into a moaning panic that swept Silk out of range of that deadly stare. With cold perspiration filming his forehead, Silk ducked low and fought his way clear of the crowd. There was no doubt in his mind that he had just seen, and been seen by, one of the blank-faced killers whose presence characterized every activity of the deadly mobs. Nor was there any doubt but what the blank-faced man had calmly murdered the policeman to prevent his blurting the discovery of the tape-marked hands, and would as calmly murder Silk for the same reason.

Beyond the edges of the milling crowd, Silk faded into the deep shadow of a doorway and breathed easier when he saw no signs of pursuit. He had made a discovery, but not one that cleared up any mysteries. He had tied in the killer mobs with the fatal accident, but he still had no idea of the purpose behind the accidents. Nor could he figure why the policeman had been murdered when other police or doctors who would presently examine the body were bound to make the same discovery.

As Silk hesitated over his next move, an ambulance moaned down the street and crept through the press of onlookers. Silk caught a glimpse of the name plate and saw that it was one of Carron Hospital's modern fleet.

MUCH as he would have liked to watch the loading of the ambulance, Silk remembered the Black Bat's warning and decided that prudence was his move. He would stay clear of the crowd, watch developments and be prepared to race for the sedan if the scene of operations should suddenly shift. It was obvious that no major crime would take place within that lighted circle and Silk was becoming increasingly sure that the accident was some sort of attention distractor to hide the real operations somewhere close by.

At that moment, Silk's own attention was captured by the sight of a man coming toward him along the sidewalk. The man was hatless, his clothing disheveled, and he reeled dizzily with every step.

Silk was about to dismiss the man as a casual celebrant when, in a beam from the streetlight, he caught a glimpse of a sensitive, elderly face on which was an expression of dazed bewilderment. Something vaguely familiar about that face stirred Silk's memory.

He stared, then stiffened incredulously. The stumbling man was Charles Morgan, missing president of Morgan Oil Company. Silk could not be mistaken, for he had seen Morgan face to face at the Stock Exchange, and evening papers had carried clear pictures of the kidnapped financier.

Silk caught the man's arm.

"Let me help you, Mr. Morgan. Are you ill, sir?"

"I—I don't know, I'm so dizzy and my mind is all mixed up. What am I doing out here? My wife was having a lawn party and asked me to step into the house to get her a wrap. I remember walking into the hall and then suddenly here I am, out here on the street. I can't understand it."

Silk almost crowed aloud in his triumph. Through a stroke of unbelievable luck, the second kidnap victim had fallen into his hands. Like Bradney, Morgan's reappearance in this dazed condition was somehow associated with the automobile accident.

What that association was, Silk had no idea. Thie thing to do was get Morgan in the hands of the Black Bat at once. The Black Bat would know how to make the best use of this astounding break.

"Here, let me take your arm," Silk murmured solicitously. "You've had a rough time, Mr. Morgan, but you're safe now. I'll take you to where you can be cared for. My car is just down the street."

Half supporting his dazed prize, Silk rapidly propelled him down the street to the sedan. He was so absorbed in the abrupt stroke of luck that he completely forgot the presence of the blank-faced killer in the neighborhood.

"You've been missing for twenty-four hours," Silk told Morgan in answer to a dazed query. "Here, lean against this fender, sir, while I get the car unlocked. It's so dark—"

Silk, bending over to fit the key into the lock, heard a sharp exhalation, a slithering sound, and a muffled thud from behind him. He started to whirl, and rammed his face into something cold and round and persuasive that made him freeze. His staring eyes made out the shape of a gun that was prodding his cheek. Behind it loomed the menacing figure of the blank-faced killer he had seen.

THE blank-faced man's left hand held a glittering hypodermic whose plunger showed that it had been discharged. The huddled figure of Morgan lay motionless on the ground.

"Your nose is too long and you're too lucky," the blank-faced man snarled and jerked his head commandingly. "Get that door open—and no funny stuff."

Silk obeyed, being careful to keep every movement slow and clearly in view. He knew too much about the ruthlessness of this killer mob to risk death.

His captor bent down and, without taking his eyes from Silk, felt of Morgan's pulse. He straightened with a grunt of satisfaction as Silk swung the sedan's door wide.

"Under the wheel, sap. I'll tell you where to drive. You've got some talking to do—plenty of talking."

"What about him?" Silk ventured, nodding toward Morgan's limp figure on the ground.

"He'll be okay there," Blank-face growled, climbing in beside Silk. "I gave him just enough dope so he'll sleep till somebody finds him. You're gonna be different, pal. You're gonna sleep *after* somebody finds you—if they ever do. Get this crate moving."

"W-where t-to," Silk quavered. There was a chance that his disguise as a middle-aged, mild-mannered individual, coupled with a pose of terror, might convince his captor that he was innocent of any ulterior motive.

"A block north and two blocks west," Blank-face barked. "I got some friends holding a car for me there. Only I think I'll use your car instead, pal. It's bigger and faster and it ain't hot like the one they grabbed. Yes, sir, it's a nice cool bus compared to that other jalopy—and as long as I've got you here where you can't beef to the law, it ain't gonna get hot."

CHAPTER XIII
In the Enemy's Hands

OBEDIENTLY driving along a side-street that led sway from the city's business section, Silk felt his brain reel. Why were the blank-faced killers so ruthless with some victims, and so gentle with others? What was the connection between the returned kidnap victims and the fatal accidents?

As Silk drove, he constantly stole sharp glances at the masklike face of his captor, faintly lighted by the glow of the dash lamp. He knew how much importance the Black Bat attached to solving the mystery of those weirdly expressionless faces, and it maddened him to be within inches of the answer, yet completely helpless. At no time did the blank-faced man's vigilance relax nor the pressure of the gun in Silk's side lessen.

The gun Silk had carried was now in his captor's possession and any attempt to recover it would be suicidal. Silk knew that he had only escaped death this long because his presence had not been explained satisfactorily to his captor. Once he had been made to talk, his life would not be worth a plugged nickel.

"Start talking," Blank-face growled abruptly. "What were you snooping around back there for? Who are you?"

"J – J – Jones," Silk stuttered, as though scared to death. "John Jones. I saw the crowd as I was driving by and stopped to look at the wreck. Then that man came staggering along and when I saw he was ill, I started to rush him to a hospital. Then you came along. You've got no right to—"

"Dry up!" Blank-face barked. "I wasn't born yesterday. I figured you took plenty of time about covering that dead bird up again, back there. Then the way you pumped Morgan. I knew you were a set-up. Nobody as innocent as you're supposed to be runs around with a rod in his pocket and his radio tuned to police calls. You're either a copper or a spy for the Black Bat. Either way, you'll spill in a hurry when the boss puts the heat on. Turn right at that next corner."

"So you want to know who I really am, eh?" Silk murmured, swinging the sedan around the indicated corner. "Well, try and find out!"

With the last words, Silk let go of the steering wheel and lunged at his captor. His right elbow drove the jabbing gun aside and his left fist came up in a smashing blow.

The abruptness of his movement gave Silk a momentary advantage. Heedless of where the slow-rolling sedan was headed, Silk swarmed over the blank-faced man, smashing and clawing at the weirdly smooth face. For a moment the killer was stunned. Then, with a roar of rage, he surged forward, jerking the gun up and swinging it viciously at Silk's head.

The blow connected with a force that nearly tore Silk's head from his shoulders. He sank into pain-racked darkness, vaguely aware that the sedan was bumping over a curb and that the blank-faced killer was leaning above him to bring it to a halt. Then darkness engulfed Silk.

His mad attack had not been made with any great hope of either overcoming his captor or escaping. Silk's sole object had been to get his sensitive fingers on that weird blank face to learn whether it was a clever mask or living flesh. That much Silk accomplished.

If he ever escaped to see the Black Bat again, he could swear to one fact. Those faces, inhuman as they appeared, were faces of living flesh, without mask or makeup....

FOR a few moments after consciousness began to come back, Silk could not tell where he was. He knew that he was lying, cruelly bound, on some hard, scratchy surface that vibrated gently and smelled of gasoline. Then as his senses cleared, Silk realized that he was on the floor of the sedan and that while the motor was idling, the car was not in motion.

Silk opened his eyes and made out the dim outlines of a man's feet planted inches from his face. He looked up and saw Blank-face sitting above him on the rear seat. Then Silk's eyes widened as he saw, by pale light streaming in through the sedan window, that the killer's right arm hung limp and his entire shoulder was stained with some dark substance.

While Silk was pondering this mystery, running steps approached the sedan, a front door was opened and there were sounds of someone sliding under the wheel. A moment later a thin, hard face poked into sight as the driver addressed Blank-face.

"I got the boss all right, Trigger. He says we can't take no chances on losing this guy like we did them other two so we're to take him straight to the main spot. The boss will be waiting for us there."

"It took you long enough to call," the blank-faced "Trigger" snarled. "Get moving before I pass out from this smashed shoulder. If that blasted Black Bat had shot an inch lower, I'd be dead right now."

Silk's heart leaped at mention of the Black Bat. Then the driver's answering words clashed any hopes of being rescued.

"I'm glad that guy didn't have a car. We sure made a monkey outa the Black Bat, didn't we? I can still see him standing there helpless, with that

big lug that was with him dead and no way to chase us or find out where we were heading. Wonder why he didn't take another shot at us, back there."

"That's easy. Gyp," Trigger said through set teeth. "He recognized this bus and figured maybe we had a pal of his inside. That proves this guy here works for the Black Bat."

Silk had nearly groaned aloud when he heard "Gyp," the driver, say that Butch was dead. For a moment there was a mist over Silk's eyes. Despite his utter helplessness, Silk was now more determined than ever to accomplish something superhuman in the way of aiding the Black Bat. Only by escaping and aiding in smashing this fiendish crime ring could he properly avenge Butch's death.

He tested his bonds and realized instantly that he could never break or loosen them.

There was nothing to do but pretend he was still unconscious and wait for a break.

"Hey," Gyp's voice drifted back from the front seat. "How come you hadda knock off that copper at the wreck, Trig?"

"He coulda blown the works," Trigger answered, his voice tight with the pain of his wound. "Him and this lug spotted the tape marks on the sucker's hands where I'd taped 'em to the wheel when I started his crate toward the intersection."

"So what?" Gyp demanded. "By this time everybody knows them wrecks are set-ups, but what good does it do 'em? They can't even hope to catch wise."

"What do you use for a brain?" Trigger growled. "The other wrecks we fixed by putting a slug in some guy's skull. The cops can't trace a slug unless they get the rod it come from. This time nobody came along so I could plug 'em in time end I hadda grab this guy and use tape. The coppers can trace the gum off that tape—maybe trace it right back to the Chief. I hadda keep anybody from spotting it until Bugs and Pinky got his body in the ambulance where they could wash the marks off with alky. Now button your lip, I don't feet like gabbing."

THE sedan traveled for some time at moderate speed. Although Silk had no idea where they were, he knew they were still well within the city by the number of stops and the amount of passing traffic.

He watched the blank-faced Trigger, trying to solve the riddle of the horrible face. There was something gruesome about the way Trigger's face stayed so expressionless and mild, even while the killer's eyes glittered with the pain of his shattered shoulder and his teeth worried drops of blood from the delicately formed lips.

Abruptly the sedan slowed, made a sharp turn and rolled up what seemed to be a darkened driveway. Silk heard the wheels rumble over a section of flooring. Then the car drew to a halt, there was the sound of big doors being closed, and lights blared on outside.

The sedan doors were jerked open and rough hands dragged Silk out onto what felt like the floor of a garage. He kept his muscles limp and his eyes closed as though still unconscious,

But his captors were taking no chances. Rough bands tested the ropes confining Silk's arms and legs. Then strips of adhesive tape were slapped over his closed eyes until there were several tight layers to prevent him from seeing his surroundings or his captors.

"Good work, both of you," a soft voice suddenly broke the silence. "Trigger, go in and lie down. We'll have that shoulder fixed up right away. Gyp, go draw a hundred dollars from the cashier as a bonus for your good work tonight."

"Thanks, Boss!" Silk heard the driver's delighted voice. "That's swell of you,"

"You earned it by capturing this man and by getting Trigger away under fire. Failure of your main mission of removing Bradney before he could tell anyone about his dream was not your fault but the fault of those blundering fools who paid for their thick-headedness. Just remember, Gyp"—the soft voice took on a sinister undertone that sent shivers down Silk's back—"I pay off quickly for obedience—and just as quickly for failure. You know, don't you, what your reward would have been if Trigger or his dead body had been left behind?"

"Yes! Yes!" The pure terror in Gyp's voice was terrible to hear. "I know, Chief, and I ain't gonna slip!"

"I want you to remember that every moment of your life, Gyp," Kroner purred. "If you do fail, first you will be given some time to think about your failure, to suffer for it at the hands of Connie and the others who are masters at the art of inflicting pain. Then, when they tire of the sport—a simple little operation on your brain, Gyp. It won't hurt—much—and afterward you won't feel a thing. You won't ever feel anything again, Gyp, because you will be a helpless, drooling idiot for the rest of your life."

"Don't! Chief, I can't stand—"

"Get out!" Kroner snapped. "Go get your money and stop sniveling. Marty, see if the prisoner is awake yet."

Someone dug a toe into Silk's side with such callous brutality that he groaned in spite of himself.

"I thought he was faking," another voice remarked. "Are you going to risk taking him to the resort, Boss?"

"He won't live long enough to make it much risk," the soft voice answered.

Silk could feel someone bending over him.

"How about it," the soft voice said in his ear, "are you willing to talk voluntarily to avoid what will otherwise become an unpleasant situation?"

SOMETHING deadly in the soft tones chilled Silk's nerves but his only reply was to clamp his lips stubbornly shut. No matter what tortures were meted out to him, he would never reveal one word of the Black Bat's secret.

"Very well," his unseen captor remarked. "The delay is of no great importance. Bring the cart, Marty."

"You're practically certain, from what happened to Trigger, that he's one of the Black Bat's helpers," another voice said. "Why not finish him right away, Boss?"

"Because the Black Bat must be completely crushed. As I promised, the police have given us no resistance to worry about. But the Black Bat is becoming a distinct menace. Our continued success depends upon his immediate death. This man must tell us who the Black Bat is and where he can be located tonight. Load him on the cart."

Silk was unceremoniously dumped onto what felt like a small table. A moment later he realized he was on some sort of wheeled vehicle, for he felt himself being rapidly pushed through a door and down a corridor. Silk's heart sank, for it became increasingly obvious that his chances of escape now were less than one in a million.

Suddenly the cart on which he lay was stopped. The soft voice, which Silk was sure, from Carol's description, must belong to Roger Kroner, came again.

"The rest of you return to your posts. Marty, you and Hack will come with me."

Silk felt what seemed to be a large sheet thrown over his body and tucked up under his chin. Then bandages were wound around his head, completely covering his taped eyes. The meaning of the strange preparations puzzled him, but naturally they presaged something unpleasant. His refusal to answer questions was being taken entirely too calmly by his captors.

There was a faint humming sound and Silk felt the cart on which he lay sinking downward. Presently it stopped and he was wheeled through what felt like a long tunnel. There was dampness in the air and a whispering echo to every footstep, which ended when they passed through sliding doors.

Then Silk's nostrils tingled to an acrid odor of antiseptics that hung heavily in the air. There was a short journey that ended in what seemed to be a closed room. Rough hands lifted Silk from the cart and dropped him onto a bed.

Silk flinched involuntarily as his chest was bared, but instead of some instrument of torture he felt the unmistakable mouthpiece of a doctor's stethoscope being moved over his skin. Presently the examination was finished.

"Perfect," the soft voice murmured. "Hand me the hypo, Connie. Then stand close so you don't miss a word he speaks. At times, some of his words may be blurred, so listen carefully."

In growing horror, Silk felt his arm seized and, a moment later, the sharp stab of a needle being driven into the flesh. He tried to cry out, to struggle, but suddenly his mind seemed to be obscured by a dense fog.

IT was becoming harder and harder to think. Silk felt as though he were rising and falling on a stormy sea. The voices of his captors would ring in his ears at one moment, then fall away to a whisper the next. In desperation, Silk clamped his teeth down hard on his own tongue in hopes the sharp pain would drive back the effects of whatever drug he had been given. But queerly, he felt no pain from the bite and presently even his jaw muscles went limp.

Only some remote and helpless corner of his brain stayed awake, reminding him of his danger, fighting to drive back the numbing fog. Then Silk felt someone bending close above him and Roger Kroner's soft voice whispered close to his ear.

"You are ready to talk now—to tell us everything we want to know. First, what is your real name?"

The warning voice, so far away in Silk's brain, shouted at him to be still. Over and over it shrieked at him that to answer that question meant death—not only for himself but for those whose lives depended upon his silence. Sleepily, Silk told himself that he would not answer.

But to his horror, he felt his own lips parting, heard his own voice mumble wearily:

"Norton Kirby. People call me Silk Kirby."

Silk subconsciously realized then what had been done to him. He had been given an injection of truth serum, the powerful drug that cut off a part of the victim's brain, making it impossible to conceal the absolute truth. No matter how hard he might try, he could not keep himself from answering every question that Roger Kroner asked him—truthfully and fully.

"Very good, Silk Kirby." came Kroner's smooth voice again. "For whom do you work?"

Silk wanted to groan in an agony of remorse, but no sound would pass his lips but the fatal answer.

"I am a valet for Tony Quinn."

He was dimly aware of a minor commotion among those who were listening. Then the commotion ceased and the questioning voice

returned, this time with an unmistakable undertone of triumph. "Then Tony Quinn is the Black Bat?"

"Yes," Silk mumbled helplessly. "Tony Quinn is the Black Bat."

CHAPTER XIV
Man of Vengeance

FOR some seconds after the sedan had roared out of the alley behind Bradneya's home, the Black Bat stood motionless. His shoulders sagged and in his face, below the black hood, were deep lines of agony. To lose two of his best friends and most trusted assistants in one night was almost more than even his staunch spirit could bear. Automatically he reloaded and holstered his twin guns before turning back toward the street.

Suddenly the sharp wail of a distant siren knifed through his preoccupation. He burst into a run. Whatever happened, he could not let the police find Butch's body.

The Black Bat stopped short with an exclamation of dazed incredulity. Butch's body no longer lay sprawled on the pavement. Instead a massive, hulking shadow was crawling painfully toward the coupé.

"Butch!" the Black Bat cried joyfully. "Lie still! I'll be right there."

New strength and hope flooded his body, washing away the aching numbness that had gripped his muscles. Pausing only to touch identifying Black Bat stickers to the foreheads of the two gunmen he had been forced to kill, he raced across and lifted Butch's huge body in his arms.

"Butch, are you badly hurt?"

"I'm—okay—Boss," Butch mumbled, grinning wanly. "Just creased—my skull."

A gasp of relief gushed out through the Black Bat's lips as his sharp eyes took in the ragged furrow across the big man's scalp. A hair's breadth lower and his worst fears would have been realized.

"You were a perfect target and that rat fired point blank," he said to Butch. "The way you went down, sprawled out and completely limp, I thought you were dead, Butch, and the whole world seemed to blow up in my face."

Lights were springing up in nearby houses as neighbors, aroused by the shooting, were cautiously investigating. The wail of sirens was close.

With superhuman strength, the Black Bat carried Butch and fairly hurled him into the coupé. Then, springing to the wheel, he kicked the motor to life and sent the car into a screaming turn that headed them away from the converging squad cars.

"What happened. Boss?" Butch asked, with returning strength. "All I got in on was some shooting and a headache."

The Black Bat described the murder trap they had so narrowly escaped. His voice dropped as he told how the sedan which Silk had been driving was now in the hands of the killers. Butch was grimly silent for several moments.

"You—you think Silk is dead?" he asked finally.

"No, Butch, I don't think Silk is dead. Despite the way this mob has ruthlessly murdered on the slightest provocation, I believe they will keep Silk alive. By this time, they'll be worrying about the Black Bat and suspecting everyone of working for him. I believe Silk will be reasonably safe until—"

THE Black Bat stopped speaking and his face blanched. The knuckles of his hands turned white with the sudden tension of his grip on the steering wheel of the coupé.

"What is it, Boss?" Butch demanded anxiously.

"Butch!" The Black Bat's voice was harsh. "We're sunk! Unless we can find and smash this mob right away, the Black Bat has followed his last crime trail. If they're at liberty tomorrow morning, the Black Bat will be either dead or in jail!"

"Boss, what do you mean?" Butch demanded anxiously. "You don't think Silk would spill—"

"Not willingly. But in my anxiety over you, Butch, I almost overlooked the greatest discovery I've made so far in this case. Bradney gave me the tip-off tonight without realizing it. The leader of this mob is clever, Butch. He isn't content with the loot of his robberies and the cleaning he can make by upsetting the stock market. He's using scopolamine—truth serum—to pump these kidnapped financiers about their future market operations, as well.

"First he starts rumors that depress a certain stock. Then when the head of that firm vanishes, the stock is further weakened, making a big killing possible. That much we figured out from what Silk and Carol learned. But now I know that the reason for releasing these financiers unharmed is so they can resume normal market operations after the mess is straightened out. When that happens, the criminal steps in and, using the information he gained with the truth serum, makes still another raid on their stock."

"Sort of a medical mind-reader, eh?" Butch growled. "But why should that—"

"Don't you see, Butch? They won't torture Silk in an effort to make him reveal my identity. They won't have to. They'll simply give him a shot of truth serum and no power on earth will be able to prevent Silk's answering every question they ask him, completely and *truthfully*."

Butch groaned as the full import of the Black Bat's words permeated his aching head.

"What you going to do?" he choked. "All they

gotta do is tip McGrath and he'll nab you."

"I hardly think my identity will be passed around too far, Butch. From what we know of Kroner, he appears to be both an egomaniac and an exhibitionist, and he hates and fears the Black Bat. A man like that would rather die than share the glory of unmasking the Black Bat with his hirelings. Besides, he has to spring coups like that to hold the loyalty of his men, No, Butch, there's a sound psychological basis for my belief that Kroner will guard my identity as jealously as you do until he can actually unmask me with his own hands in front of his mob."

"We gotta get to him first," Butch snarled, "but we don't know who he is or where."

"We'll find out," the Black Bat promised grimly. "Right now, you've got to get busy, Butch. Carol is out somewhere, getting that information I asked for. If the mob leader learns about me, he'll also learn about my assistants. The streets will be patrolled by killers, hunting you both, and the house and tunnel will be a death-trap. You've got to get that head fixed up somehow, Butch, then find Carol and get her out of sight."

BUTCH twisted his puffed lips into a wry grin.

"My head don't hurt much and I know a druggist that'll patch it without getting nosy. His place is only a couple blocks from here."

"Good." The Black Bat parked along the dark street and hurriedly scribbled a list of addresses. "Here are the places Carol was going for her information. Canvass them all, and don't give up until you find her. Then get out of sight, both of you, and stay hidden until you read in the paper that this mob has been wiped out. Don't go near either the house or your rooms at any time."

"I know just the spot, Boss," Butch began. "It's a—"

The Black Bat slapped his gloved hands across the big man's mouth, cutting off the words.

"Don't tell me a thing, Butch. Then if I'm captured and given the truth serum, I can't betray you two. But I need the information Carol was getting. Suppose you phone the house every hour. Sometime during the night, trap or no trap, I've got to get into the house, and will get the call. But if no one answers the first ring, or if a strange voice answers, hang up and instantly dial another number—any number. That will prevent anyone's tracing the call."

"All right," Butch agreed reluctantly. "But I don't like the idea of lyin' low when you're in trouble. It ain't—"

"Obey orders, Butch. I'll do better if I know you and Carol are safe, and it's a one-man task now, anyhow. My first job is somehow to find and rescue Silk. Of course I could let myself be captured, but I'll only do that as a last resort. The chance is too great that I'd simply be gunned out without ever getting a chance to fight. The biggest break I could get now would be to stumble onto one of their mobs in action. That is, if they're out tonight."

"Boss!" Butch stopped short in the door of the coupé. "I almost forgot. Them killers are hitting again all over town, just like last night. I got it over the radio, along with a report that somebody found Morgan doped near one of those car wrecks. That's what made me go barging across the street back there. I had the radio turned on and I figured you'd want to know. There's a bunch of bad car wrecks, too, only a lot of these are ambulances getting smashed up."

"Ambulances?" the Black Bat exclaimed sharply. "What ambulances?"

"I don't remember all of them, Boss, but there was two from City General, one from Industrial, one from Carron, and one private one that belonged to some funeral director. I got that from a news broadcast."

"The pattern is getting plainer," the Black Bat snapped, "but we haven't time to sit down and study clues. Our only salvation now lies in action and plenty of it. So long, Butch."

Butch trotted down the street toward the drugstore as the coupé whipped out of sight around a corner. When he was certain no one could be observing him, the big man surreptitiously scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. Then he blew his nose with angry vigor.

Massive Butch O'Leary might be a slow thinker, but he was smart enough to understand one thing tonight. It would be little short of a miracle if the four friends ever again sat in the Black Bat's laboratory, planning another relentless drive against organized crime.

CHAPTER XV
Out for Blood

GOING on after dropping Butch it was all the Black Bat could do to keep from pressing the foot-feed of the coupé to the floor. His jangled nerves cried for action, yet constructive action was impossible until he knew what course to follow.

Silk's life—if he were still alive—and the very existence of the Black Bat and his confederates depended upon smashing through to the heart of the killer mob at once. But every angle the Black Bat's mind followed seemed to end at a stone wall.

There were many things he would have liked to do if time were not so precious. He would have

liked to return to John Bradney's home in case Dr. Robbins did appear to keep his mysterious appointment. After all, evidence of his complicity in the murder trap was purely circumstantial.

But there was too much chance that time so spent would be wasted. If guilty, Robbins would not dare appear. Even if he were innocent, the sight of police cars in the neighborhood might frighten him away.

For another thing, the Black Bat had hoped to visit Carron Hospital that night. So many angles of the case pointed to that world-famous institution that the Black Bat could not forget his obligation to the murdered Dr. Aker who had broken all precedent by inviting the Black Bat to come to his aid.

There was a growing conviction in the Black Bat's mind that the deadly Roger Kroner was either a doctor, or was intimately associated with a doctor. Besides the direct connection of Dr. Aker's murder and Tony Quinn's kidnapping from the hospital, there were numerous clues less obvious. For one thing, scopolamine was too dangerous a drug to be administered by anyone but a skilled medical man. Unless each dosage were delicately balanced to the patient's physical condition, death might follow its injection. For another thing, the drugging of Bradney and Morgan so that they awakened unharmed at a desired time showed medical skill.

But strongest in the Black Bat's mind was the growing certainty that the blank faces of the mob lieutenants were the result of plastic surgery. And despite their hideous appearance, the faces seemed to be a diabolically clever job that had created their ghastly appearance for some mysterious but definite purpose.

Suspicion seemed to be focused on Carron Hospital, but still encompassed far too many possible suspects to make that information valuable in the limited time at the Black Bat's command. He had purposely avoided the hospital before, partly because it would be almost impossible to get in without being seen by nurses and internes, and partly because he disliked the chance of frightening nervous patients by his grim appearance in the corridors.

The Black Bat snapped on the radio. His best break would, as he told Butch, be to stumble on one of the killer mobs and track them to their lair. But their blows had been so scattered and so unpredictable that this possibility seemed remote except by sheer accident.

His eyes narrowed to flaming slits as the voice of the police announcer brought a story of death and destruction to his ears. The gangs were striking even more ruthlessly and unpredictably than the previous night. Squad cars were being hurled from one point to another in a fruitless effort to block the looting.

NONE of the reported points of attack were near enough for the Black Bat to hope to reach one before the gang had cleaned up and vanished. His only hope lay in anticipating some objective and getting there ahead of the killers.

He tuned in a leading station just as music was fading out to clear the way for an announcement. The voice of the announcer barked tensely:

"Flash! We bring you the latest reports of the city-wide chain of attacks by the killer mobs. Two more leading financiers, Jacob Ambruster and Howard Holcomb, have been kidnapped. A third kidnapping attempt ended in failure—and murder. Members of a gang led by one of the blank-faced chiefs, invaded the home of Albert Norsman just a few minutes ago but were frustrated in their kidnap attempt by the unexpected arrival of Norsman's secretary, Clarence Aikenson.

"Police who reached the scene a few moments later believe that the gang, fearing capture, fled after shooting down both Norsman and Aikenson in a fit of vengeful rage. Norsman was the former president of Norsman Manufacturing Company, but had practically retired from active business, devoting his time to numerous philanthropies and his work as voluntary chairman of the board of Egyptian Museum. The city will—"

The Black Bat snapped off the radio while a grim, humorous smile touched his thinned lips. The news he had just heard brought him the first faint hope of outwitting the mobs.

Despite the police reconstruction of the crime, the Black Bat was positive the murder of Albert Norsman had not been a purposeless vengeance slaying. The mob's plans were too well organized to be that badly upset by the unexpected arrival of a secretary on the scene. If they had wanted to kidnap Norsman, they would have cold-bloodedly murdered anyone who interfered, and taken the aged philanthropist away. But the fact that Norsman was practically retired from business or market operations ruled out kidnapping as a profitable enterprise.

The Black Bat was positive something deeper and more profitable lay beneath the surface—something the police had overlooked. The killer mobs had never wasted time unless some enormous loot was at stake. But what? The Black Bat thought he could hazard a guess.

He sent the coupé hurtling down a side street into a part of town that was quiet and practically deserted. Before a small all-night drugstore he parked and sat a moment, surveying the interior through the show window. When at last he was positive the store was empty except for the proprietor, the Black Bat pulled his black hat down so that the floppy brim shadowed the scars on his face and left the coupé. It was a dangerous move to

appear thus in a lighted public place but he had to risk it.

The Black Bat waited until the proprietor's back was turned. Then he quickly stepped into the store and, keeping his head turned away, slipped into a telephone booth. He dialed a number and a moment later Commissioner Warner's voice answered.

"COMMISSIONER, this is the Black Bat. Please listen carefully and give me what information you can as quickly as possible. Human lives are at stake."

"I'll do what I can," Warner answered eagerly. "You don't know how much I'm hoping for your success tonight. What can I tell you?"

"First, did anyone at all show up at the home of Bradney, the drug man, after my gun battle there tonight? Bradney was expecting a visitor, but circumstances made it impossible for me to wait and see if he'd show up."

"Not a soul," the commissioner said promptly. "Some bodies were found there with your trademark on them. And Bradney insisted you would be back. McGrath left a guard to trap you, in case you did return, but the last I heard, no one had showed up."

The Black Bat frowned. By not appearing for his promised call on Bradney, Dr. Robbins had doubly condemned himself as the man responsible for the murder attempt.

"Now, Commisaioner, here is a vitally important question. Is there some object of great intrinsic value about to be exhibited at the Egyptian Museum?"

There was a startled grunt from Warner.

"Where did you get that, Black Bat? I'm sorry, but of all the questions you might ask, that's the one I am not at liberty to answer."

"Commissioner"—the Black Bat's voice was grim— "you have answered that question for me. But believe me, your reticence now will cost the lives of innocent people. Have I ever abused your confidence in the past?"

"No, it isn't that. But this is a secret so closely guarded that—Oh, what's the use! Black Bat, I owe you plenty, and I'm not going to hesitate now. Yes, there is such an object and the fact that you asked that question proves that despite our efforts, the secret has leaked out. A collection of tomb jewelry, valued at three-quarters of a million, was sent here two days ago to be exhibited in the museum. When this horror struck, we quickly concealed the collection and hoped the mobs wouldn't learn it was even in the city."

"They know," the Black Bat answered grimly. "And they even know where it is right now. Your only hope of saving it is to tell me the location and keep your men away. I've got to get there first, alone, and make the mob lead me to their headquarters. It's our one chance of smashing them."

There was a moment's silence. Then Commissioner Warner's voice came again, heavy with its burden of worry.

"If you fail me, Black Bat, it means my finish, but I'll tell you. Only for heaven's sake, if you keep them from getting it, call me back and report so I can start breathing again. It isn't the value of the collection so much as the fact that only two members of the museum board were told where it was concealed. One of those members, Norsman, is dead. So if the collection is stolen now, the whole responsibility will be mine. I'm the only one left who knows its location."

"I'll see that you get good news," the Black Bat promised.

"I trust you. The collection was slipped into the vault of a little outlying community bank because that seemed the last place on earth its presence would be suspected. It's in a safe deposit box of the Melton Park Bank."

"Thanks, Commissioner. And whatever you do, keep the police away from there tonight. You'll hear from me later."

A MOMENT later the Black Bat was back in the coupé, racing westward toward Melton Park Bank—and a rendezvous with the murder mob. He had been certain that the police had overlooked the real reason for Albert Norsman's murder because the police did not know about the use of scopolamine, or truth serum, by the gang.

But the Black Bat had instantly guessed that the real reason for the attack on Norsman was to use the serum in order to worm some information out of him. Having gained that information, the gang had slain Norsman and his secretary.

If they now had the information, then an attempt would surely be made to steal the jewelry collection cached at the bank. It was the Black Bat's one chance in a million of tracking the mob back to their leader—and to Silk. Roger Kroner wanted to find the Black Bat, did he? Perhaps his wish was about to be granted.

But a great deal depended, now, upon speed and timing. If the gang had gone straight to the bank from Norsman's home, then there was a chance of their being through and gone before the Black Bat could reach there. However, he was fairly sure that they would first contact their leader, Kroner, for orders, which might give him time.

A few minutes later the Black Bat concealed the coupé half a block from the Melton Park Bank. The narrow street was silent and empty, which was evidence that the mob had not yet struck, for it was unlikely that they would have penetrated the vault and obtained the loot without an uproar that would

arouse the entire neighborhood. Stealth definitely was not one of the characteristics of the killer mobs.

Checking his guns and donning the tight-fitting hood, the Black Bat stole forward to survey the scene of impending action. The bank stood in the middle of the block, beside an alley that only ran back to a closed court behind the squat bank building.

The only way of reaching the bank lay along that street, which was so narrow that only one-way traffic was permitted past the bank. This meant that one or two men each side of the bank could guard it so effectively that not even the Black Bat could approach unseen. Yet it was essential to his plan that he actually penetrate into the bank itself during the robbery.

Returning to the coupé, the Black Bat opened a secret compartment and drew out two things. One was a complete costume, the exact duplicate of the Black Bat garb he was wearing. This he concealed on his person. The other was a coil of thin but strong rope. It was this same rope that had saved Butch and Carol from the flames on the preceding night. Now, if luck was with the Black Bat again, it might play as important a role in saving Silk.

With the coil of rope over his shoulder, the Black Bat was nearly back to the alley beside the bank when two sets of headlights appeared simultaneously, one at each end of the block in which the bank stood. The mob had come.

Like a somber ghost, the Black Bat drifted into the little dead-end alley beside the bank and vanished.

CHAPTER XVI
Death Wears Black

POWERFUL sedans—two of them—nosed into the narrow street and halted, facing one another a block apart, Each car seemed jammed to the running boards with slit-eyed, hard-faced thugs, each displaying a ready pistol.

In the front seat of one car sat the blank-faced Connie. His driver was the-rat-faced Gyp.

"Okay, Gyp," Connie growled. "You know the schedule. Get going."

Grinning, Gyp flicked his lights off and on. At an answering flash from the other car, he wheeled the sedan into a complete circle and backed swiftly into the narrow street The other car was following the same maneuver. They stopped at last, completely blocking the street on each side of the bank, each car pointing back the way it had come for an instant getaway.

A man climbed out of the back of each sedan, carrying a small package. The two met at the bank door, blended into the shadows for a moment and then reappeared, running. A moment later there was a dull *blam* and a sheet of flame from the doorway, followed by a crash of falling wreckage and the sharp clamor of burglar alarms.

"On your toes!" Connie snapped and leaped out, running toward the dynamited entrance.

He was joined by half a dozen thugs who followed him into the bank, paying no attention to the clattering alarm gongs. Outside, the remaining mobsters took up submachine-guns and stepped into adjoining doorways where they could cover the whole street. The whole undertaking moved smoothly and swiftly, with the unmistakable perfection of careful rehearsal.

"Last job, Eddie," one of the guards remarked to his companion as they stood beside one waiting sedan. "By morning we'll be paid off, and on our way. The Chief is smart, knowing when to pull in his horns. Most guys would make a killing and then keep on riding their luck until they slipped."

"The Chief don't slip," his companion agreed. "But I don't mind tellin' you, I'll be glad when we get where that Black Bat can't land on our necks, I get the shivers thinkin' that guy might be right here, layin' for us now. He's everywhere."

"Don't let Connie hear you say that. Sure the Black Bat's smart—but the Chief is smarter, Has the Black Bat stopped us from making one haul? Has he nabbed even one of the bosses or even got a good look at one? You bet he hasn't. He's licked and he knows it. Fat chance of his being around here to—"

The thug's words died in a tinny rattle that choked in his throat. His companion, turning to see what was wrong, saw one shaking hand pointing up toward the night sky. He followed the direction of that gesture and a choked scream of fear tore from his lips.

His bulging eyes saw a fearsome apparition overhead that froze his blood, The Black Bat had come. He was flying down out of the sky with the ribbed cloak spread into fluttering wings—flying in mid-air, straight at the paralyzed thugs.

THE sight was too much for the crooks. The Black Bat, walking on the street or riding in a car, would have been met with a hail of death from two machine-guns. But the Black Bat flying down out of the sky was something unhuman, something against which mere lead would be futile, The two dropped their guns and whirled to flee.

As they turned. the Black Bat let go of the thin rope on which he had swung down from a fire-escape across the street and left the rope dangling from the high lamp post over which he had looped it before the thugs arrived. His hurtling figure plummeted straight into the fleeing men, bowling them over like tenpins. Even before he struck, the

Black Bat had whipped out his twin guns. They rose and fell in unison and the two thugs lay motionless.

It had happened in a fraction of a second and when the Black Bat straightened from knocking out the two guards, he saw the third guard still in the act of raising his gun. Down the street, the three thugs guarding the opposite car whirled at the sounds. One, whose nerves were more hardy than those of his companions, instantly raised his gun and depressed the trip.

The Black Bat dropped as the stream of lead whipped over his head. His guns blazed and the gunner went down. Another shot sent the guard across the street pitching into the gutter, wounded. The two remaining thugs fled to the protection of doorways.

Instantly the Black Bat raced to the shattered bank door and slipped through into the concealing darkness within, a moment before two gunmen barged out to learn the cause of the commotion. One gunman raced through the door and paused on the steps, expecting to see blue-coated police making a futile attempt to block their pillage. He stopped short, seeing nothing but an empty street that appeared, at first glance, to be littered with the bodies of his pals.

He turned, to speak to his companion and uttered a squawk of alarm. He was alone on the steps, In panic, he turned and darted back through the wrecked door straight into a fist that exploded like dynamite against his jaw. He lost interest in his surroundings from that moment.

The Black Bat dragged him into deep shadows, touched a sticker to his forehead and turned back to the other gunman who had met a similar fate. He bent over this second man for a moment, the darkness concealing his activities.

Then he straightened, tossed the limp body over his shoulder and raced across the lobby toward the vault stairway He passed through gates torn aside by a second devastating blast of explosives and down the stairs to where he could get a clear view of the safety deposit vault.

He saw a weird scene. The blank-faced Connie stood at one side with a gun in one hand and a torch in she other, The torch threw feeble light on two goggled figures who were running the blinding flame of a cutting torch over one of the safe boxes.

Two more thugs stood beside Connie with drawn guns, but their nervous glances stole constantly over toward the stairway where, the Black Bat lurked in the shadows.

SUDDENLY one of the goggled men gave an exclamation of satisfaction and snapped off the flame of his torch, All five pressed forward as the steel door was wrenched loose and a large box hauled out. The lid of the box was thrown back and simultaneous gasps of pleasure rose as the flashlight in Connie's hand illuminated rows of shimmering jewels.

"That's it!" Connie snapped. "Close it up and get moving. Pete, you and Shiv go ahead with your guns ready. I don't like the way those shots stopped so suddenly outside."

As he reached for the box of jewels, there came a faint scrape of a shoe incautiously placed, halfway up the stairs. With the speed of light, Connie's gun jerked up and blazed death at the sound. A moment laser, both guards added their fire. For a moment the vault thundered to the roar of guns and the scream of lead glancing from marble.

Then, as the three guns were silenced. there came the unmistakable slither of a limp body falling. Something bumped down the stairs and thudded at the bottom, All guns centered toward the sound. Then Connie's light flicked toward the foot of the stairs. A concerted gasp arose.

There sprawled-motionless on the marble floor at the bottom of the steps lay a figure. But what changed the first gasps of surprise to yells of triumph was the fact that the figure was clothed from head to foot in a closefitting black garment, with a black hood almost covering the face and a ribbed black cloak sprawled around it like broken wings of some huge bird.

"The Black Bat!" chorused the thugs. "We got the Black Bat!" They started to surge forward. "Jerk off that hood and see who he really is!"

"Stop!" The word barked from Connie's expressionless lips halted the rush. "The Chief's orders are to bring the Black Bat to him for first look. See if he's dead, Shiv."

The thug leaned forward, fumbled cautiously, then straightened.

"Can you beat that, Connie? All them slugs flying and not a one touched him. He ain't dead, Connie. He's just out cold from falling downstairs and bumping his noggin. Ain't that a laugh? The great Black Bat knocks himself out!"

"Laugh later," Connie barked coldly. "This neighborhood will be swarming with law in five minutes. Tie the Black Bat up and dump him in my car. Then round up everybody that's still alive and beat it. Be at the new meeting place in half an hour and maybe you'll get to see the finish of the Black Bat. When the Chief sees what we brought him, he might feel generous. Now scram!"

"What if the Black Bat wakes up, Connie?"

"Knock him in the head with a gun butt," Connie rasped. "And if he never wakes up again after that, who cares?"

CHAPTER XVII
Butch and Carol Disobey

BUTCH was frantic. He had canvassed all but two of the addresses given him by the Black Bat without catching sight of Carol. In every case, he learned that she had been there and gone.

But what tortured him now was the discovery that the two remaining addresses were each only a few blocks from Tony Quinn's home.

That meant that Carol would undoubtedly go from her last call straight to the gatehouse behind Quinn's estate—and walk straight into the death-trap that would surely be waiting. The trouble was that the two addresses lay in opposite directions from the house and there was no way of guessing which one Carol would visit last. If he rushed to one, she might walk to her doom from the other direction before Butch could discover his fatal mistake.

The idea of phoning ahead to have Carol stopped at either place never entered Butch's single-track mind. He had set out to find Carol in person and his whole being was doggedly concentrated on that.

Butch was, in fact, so completely absorbed in finding Carol that the idea of being noticed himself never occurred to him. Yet wherever he went, Butch was the most conspicuous figure on the street, His massive body, the purposeful grimness of his expression, and the huge turban of white bandages that towered over even the thickest crowds, made him a marked man wherever he went. Motorists gaped in passing. and people on the sidewalks pushed aside to open a path for him, then turned to stare after his retreating back.

Butch was totally unaware of the sensation he was causing, and equally unconscious of the heavy sedan that crept quietly along the street, staying always a few paces behind. When Butch vanished into buildings, the sedan waited and took up the pursuit again as soon as he reappeared.

There were three men in the sedan. The two in the front seat were hard-faced, cold-eyed men whose flashy clothing bulged ominously over holstered guns.

The man who sat quietly in the shadows of the rear seat, his face almost completely concealed by a low-pulled hat brim, was a small man with a delicate, babyish face that was completely devoid of expression.

Butch came racing out of a building and halted for a moment staring in tortured indecision, at the two remaining addresses on his list. There was nothing to do but choose one and hope for the best, Butch shut his eyes and blindly stabbed a massive finger at the sheet of paper. He opened his eyes again and saw that his blind lottery had selected the address of the local medical board where records would give Carol much of the information she was seeking.

Butch sprang to the curb, hailed a cruising cab and barked the address.

"A dollar bonus for every minute under fifteen it takes you to get there." he barked at the cabby.

The taxi lurched into motion like a frightened rabbit. A hundred feet behind, the waiting sedan spurted ahead and settled down to patient pursuit. Butch, sitting on the edge of the seat and cracking his huge knuckles in impatience, had no eyes for anything but the street ahead.

THE cab zoomed around a corner and slid to a halt with a scream of tortured rubber.

"Here you are," the cabby exulted. "Seven minutes flat. That makes eight bucks extra."

Butch was half-way out of the cab, clawing out a handful of bills, when his sharp eyes spied a slender figure marching briskly under the radiance of a streetlight two blocks down the street. Butch piled back into the cab with a roar of exultation. The figure was unmistakably Carol and she was just turning into the dark street behind Tony Quinn's estate, heading for the gatehouse.

"That girl up there!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Catch her before she—"

"Keep your shirt on. Big Boy," a cold voice advised, close to Butch's ear. "Some friends of yours are taking care of the lady. so you just relax and walk out here quiet, like a good boy."

Butch jerked his head around and saw the cold, uncompromising muzzle of a submachine-gun poked at him through the cab window. He looked the other way and saw a gun that might have been its twin covering him from that window. He was trapped, neatly and inescapably. The two thugs had parked the sedan directly behind and come quietly up, one on each side of the cab.

"I'll twist your head off and throw it in your face!" Butch roared in a burst of helpless rage.

"Try it, Tom Thumb," one of the cold-eyed gunmen sneered. "My orders were to bring you and the dame in either dead or alive, so go ahead and start something."

The cab driver had screwed his face around, seen the two menacing guns and been reduced to a state of helpless. quivering terror, Butch realized that he could expect no aid from that quarter and was smart enough to know that Carol would not be aided by his getting himself killed. Growling furiously, he cautiously opened the door of the cab.

As he started to climb out, his eyes fell upon the section of floor in front, lighted by the hooded

meter lamp. The driver had been frozen in the act of pulling out from the curb. The gear shift lever was engaged and only the weight of the driver's shaking foot on the clutch kept the cab out of gear.

Butch's eyes narrowed, As he brushed past the back of the driver's neck, he stiffened one thumb and jabbed it sharply into a sensitive spot behind one of the man's flaring ears.

The driver squawked in fright at the pain. One foot slipped off the depressed clutch pedal at the moment the other jerked convulsively against the throttle. The cab snorted and leaped ahead for an instant before the motor died.

But that brief jerk was enough to knock both tommy-guns aside for an instant and give Butch a chance to drop to the ground. As he went down, a burst of chattering flame lanced a few inches over his head, turning the steel roof of the cab into a sieve.

Butch struck the pavement with his knees bent, before the startled gunner could lower the muzzle of his bucking, chattering weapon, those bent knees straightened and all of Butch's tremendous weight and drive slammed into the killer's middle. The gun and its owner quieted at the same moment.

STILL clutching his victim in a football tackle, Butch rolled in a complete somersault that brought him into a sitting position almost under the feet of the second gunner who was racing around the back of the cab to aid his companion. Before the killer could bring his weapon to bear, Butch flung the limp body in his arms and the two went down in a tangle of flying limbs and clattering guns.

Before the second gunner could squirm loose from the dead weight of his pal, Butch's ham-like fist descended twice and there were two explosive cracks of violent impact. Butch eyed the still forms disgustedly, then climbed to his feet, flexing his big fists in disappointment.

It was then the blank-faced leader made his fatal mistake. Until that moment, Butch had been unaware of his presence. He started toward the sedan to appropriate it and rush after Carol, believing the car to be empty. The leader chose this moment to swing the door open and lean out, leveling a pistol at Butch's head.

Butch, for all his size, could move like greased lightning. The sight of the gun and the weird blank face bad barely registered on his senses when he was sweeping up one of the discarded machine-guns and hurling it straight at the unexpected apparition.

The pistol exploded but the slug hissed six feet over Butch's head. The heavy gun slammed into the killer's chest with a crunch of breaking bones and a force that nearly tore the door off the sedan. Butch caught the shattered corpse before it could topple to the pavement, and shoved it back into the sedan before leaping behind the wheel.

Sight of the weird face, expressionless even in death had recalled the Black Bat's desire to examine one of the killers. Then every other thought was swept away at the realization that during the few moments of conflict, Carol had vanished.

Kicking the sedan to life. Butch sent it roaring down the street and around the corner where he had last seen Carol. He looked down the quiet, familiar street toward the gatehouse at the rear of Tony Quinn's estate and a roar of rage burst from his lips.

Carol was just turning into the gatehouse when the shadows at both sides erupted a horde of dark figures that swarmed around to hide her. The sight of Carol in the hands of the killer mob drove the last shred of caution from Butch's mind. With a snarl of fury, he drove the throttle to the floor and headed straight for the mob.

Only the fact that the mob holding Carol thought the car bearing down on them was driven by their own companions kept Butch from perishing in a hail of leaden death. As it was, he had slammed to a halt in their very midst and was out, smashing right and left with those deadly pile-driver fists before the killers awoke to their danger. When they did snatch out their guns, there was no opportunity to use them for fear of shooting one another.

"Get him! Smash him down!" shrieked the blank-faced man who led this mob, dancing furiously, "A thousand dollars to the man who kills him!"

HIS answer was the limp body of one of his own men that came sailing over the heads of the mob to slam him to the pavement. In the center of the swaying mass, Butch roared happily as his fists wrought terrible havoc. Jaws were broken, heads banged enthusiastically together, shrieking bodies hurled like cannon-balls into other shrieking bodies.

"Butch! Look out behind you!"

Carol's warning cry sifted into Butch's ears. He whirled, tossing a limp figure aside, and side-stepped in time to miss the glittering arc of a knife in the hands of a scarred thug. Before the thug could recover from his fruitless lunge, a sledge-hammer blow put him out of the fight.

Butch whirled again, then lowered his fists. Except for Carol and five limp forms sprawled on the pavement, he was alone. The surviving thugs understood the profession of knifing or shooting in the back, but this business of trading punches with a mountain that moved like a thunderbolt was too much for them. They had snatched up their unconscious leader and fled.

"Butch, you darling!" Carol gasped, clinging to the big man's arm. "That was the sweetest sight I've ever seen. I guess I'm no lady because I wasn't horrified—only thrilled."

"Aw"—Butch blushed and scraped a big toe against the pavement—"them guys wasn't tough, as long as they couldn't use their guns. Besides, I sort of took 'em by surprise."

"But how did you happen to appear so opportunely?" Suddenly Carol's face blanched as the full realization of what had happened penetrated her mind. "Butch, those killers—here! That means they know—they've discovered who the Black Bat really is."

Butch quickly acquainted Carol with everything that had happened. Her eyes closed in silent pain at the recital.

"So," Butch finished grimtly, "I'm supposed to duck you outta sight and stick with you till it's all over. But I ain't gonna do it, Carol. I—I'm gonna revolt. These guys ain't so tough and the Black Bat needs me. I'm putting you in a safe place and then I'm gonna make one of these cream puffs take me to his boss. If the Black Bat gets there, too, like he planned, maybe I'll be around to help in case he needs me. If—if the Black Bat don't make it, I—I"—Butch gulped at the thought—"then I can take a few of 'em with me, to sort of even the score."

"Butch," Carol said firmly, "I'm with you. The Black Bat wouldn't run away from danger and we're not going to, either. We'll both go. If anything happened to Tony, I—I wouldn't want to be around, anyhow."

"Good girl!" Butch roared jubilantly. "Let's go!"

He caught the nearest thug and revived him by the simple expedient of slapping his face, first on one side and then the other. The man's eyes opened dully, then went wide. He ducked, squealing in terror at the sight of the bruised monster bending above him.

"How about it?" Butch demanded, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. "What do you say we start kind of sparring around again, you and me? Just friendly boxing, you know."

"No!" the thug wailed, trying futilely to squirm loose from Butch's iron grasp. "Let me alone! Don't hit me again!"

"Okay! Then suppose you get in that car and drive us to where your big boss is waiting, huh? Would you rather do that?"

"I—I—" The thug wet his lips. Then abruptly his lids drooped to hide a sudden glitter of animal cunning. "All right," he mumbled, "if you promise not to hit me again. And you gotta protect me from the Chief. He'll kill me sure for giving away his hideout spot."

BUTCH tossed the body of the dead mob leader into a corner of the seat and he and Carol climbed in.

Both of them held pistols, taken from unconscious thugs.

"You pull just one phony move," Butch promised, prodding his gun into the neck of the thug behind the wheel, "and I'll blow your coat collar right up between your teeth."

The thug behind the wheel let his lips curve in a faint, hard grin that vanished instantly. Before starting the motor, his left foot stole out and touched a small button, hidden from sight by the shadow of the clutch pedal. Neither Carol nor Butch were aware of the movement, nor could they see the tiny red light that blinked on as a result. The red light was situated low down on the radiator grill in front.

Even if Butch and Carol had seen the light, they would not have guessed its meaning. But to any other member of the killer mob, that light was a warning that enemies occupied the car.

"Take it easy," Butch warned his captive. "Drive right up to the place like we belonged there. Your boss will recognize the car and never suspect we ain't friends."

CHAPTER XVIII
Reunion in Darkness

HAZILY Silk began to emerge from the queer, heaving fog that had engulfed his brain, and to recognize outside sensations. He realized that the period of endless questioning was at last over and that he was once more on the queer cart, being taken back through the damp tunnel. How long he had been in a coma or what direction the bulk of the questioning had taken, he could not remember.

That he could remember anything at all of his experiences was due only to the fact that he had been fully conscious, not drugged into a stupor, when the dose had been administered. From the moment the morphine with which the scopolamine was combined took hold, his memory had been a total blank.

He only knew now, with a growing horror, that he had betrayed the Black Bat and his aides, that his own unwilling lips had pronounced an irrevocable death sentence upon his comrades. The terrible knowledge filled Silk with an agony of remorse. He felt that he deserved to die for his failure, but he was filled with a grim determination to make his death a smashing blow against Roger Kroner and his killers.

Silk felt the cart upon which he lay bump over a threshold and into an area that felt spacious and warm. The sheet and bandages were stripped away, but layers of tape still covered his eyes. He

cautiously tested his bonds but found them cruelly tight and unyielding. Any sacrifice he might make would have to wait until at least his hands were free.

"Chief," one of Silk's captors said. "there's never been a big shot with brains like yours. I can't get over it. One shot of the stuff and he spills everything he knows, as pretty as you please. This game is fool-proof. Why quit tonight, right when everything is going so swell and the dough's rolling in? Why not keep on grabbing? Nobody can stop you, now."

"An idea like that," Roger Kroner's soft voice replied coldly, "illustrates why you will never be a leader. Every big crime plan that ever failed, failed because someone was too gold-hungry to stop within a safe margin. The best scheme develops flaws if carried too far. We split and disband tonight. You men leave town, and I return to my circle. When the excitement has settled, we reassemble and strike again with an entirely new plan."

"And with no Black Bat to interfere," chortled a third voice, "we can take the whole country to the cleaners before we get through. Chief, you're a marvel."

"Certainly," Kroner agreed. "I spent years planning all this. It should be perfect."

"Chief"—that was Hack's voice, strangely hesitant—"you—you ain't forgetting the deal with us? After the mob breaks up, tonight, you—you're going through with us the way you agreed, ain't you? Honest, sometimes when I see this puss of mine in the mirror it even gives me the creeps."

"Certainly', you fool!" Kroner snarled. "Do you think I want my trademark turned loose for the police to pick up? Thanks to that infernal meddler of an Aker, one good look at your faces would send me to the electric chair. If I'd had any idea he was mailing his report to the Society, I'd have killed him earlier instead of waiting until that night."

ONE of the thugs addressed Kroner.

"Shall I take this canary downstairs and put a slug through his head, Chief?" he asked. "He's done all the singing you need and that would be one of the Black Bat's pals out of our hair for keeps."

"No, Marty, that would be selfish when so many of our men deserve a chance to even personal scores. I'm due at headquarters in half an hour to deliver final instructions on the payoff and disbanding. I'll take this man along and let the boys give him a slow finish. If Mike and Arndt don't fail us, we'll have the other two, and perhaps the Black Bat himself there before long. That should give the boys a real treat."

"There's guys in that mob," Marty growled, "who'd tear the Black Bat and his pals into little pieces, a pinch at a time, and then pour boiling oil on what's left."

"Yes," Kroner acknowledged pleasantly. "That is what I meant. In fact, I shall be disappointed if they don't."

Silk shivered involuntarily at the undertone of inherent cruelty in the soft voice. His chances of getting loose to wreak vengeance were growing slimmer by the minute.

The muffled ringing of a telephone sent Kroner out of the room. Silk sensed when the soft-voiced leader returned, his voice quivering with exultation.

"Success! The Black Bat himself, unconscious and tied tightly, is waiting for us at the new meeting place. Connie got him, along with the Egyptian jewel haul. And Mike reports that they're following big O'Leary now, waiting to nail him when he contacts the girl, Carol Baldwin. Grab Kirby, you two, and come along. I'm anxious to see the Black Bat's face when he wakes up and realizes his predicament."

Silk was thrown over a burly shoulder as though he were a sack of oats. Though the agony in his soul nearly made him groan aloud, he managed to remain limp and quiet as he was carried into what smelled like a garage.

"What did Connie say when he found out that the Black Bat was Tony Quinn?" Marty asked.

"Connie hasn't found out—and neither has anyone else besides us three. I sent word that I'd kill anyone who raised that hood of the Black Bat's. I've waited too long and risked too much to have this triumph stolen by anyone else. Not even Mike and Carsty know why I ordered O'Leary and that Baldwin girl picked up. I purposely sent men who didn't see those two when we had them prisoners last night so nobody, would guess there was any connection with the Black Bat. Come on!"

Silk was tossed roughly into the back of a car and the others climbed in, trampling carelessly over his helpless figure. Doors squealed open and the car purred out into the night.

The trip was surprisingly short. The car made a sharp turn, then halted for an exchange of whispers with what Silk guessed were guards. Then they rolled forward a short distance and the three got out. Silk was hoisted to the same burly shoulder and carried up a short flight of steps and into a babble of voices that abruptly stilled.

"It's him," somebody cried. "The Chief himself."

"Good evening, boys." Silk heard Kroner's suave voice purr. "You are to be congratulated on arranging this pleasant surprise for me. So this heap of black rags before me now on the floor is the fearsome Black Bat, eh?"

THERE was the unmistakable sound of shoe

leather against limp flesh and a burst of snarling laughter from the crowd. Silk raged inwardly but he was helpless, his limbs half paralyzed from the cruel ropes that bound him. He was on his feet but only the grasp of his two captors, Hack and Marty, prevented his slumping to the floor.

"Before we feast our eyes on the features under this black hood," Kroner continued, "let me introduce the Black Bat's assistant who obligingly revealed all the secrets of the great avenger for us. Marty, take off Silk Kirby's blindfold so he can enjoy this great occasion with us."

Laughter followed this quip but when the tape had been jerked free Silk saw that the malevolent eyes fixed upon him held no humor. There were some twenty-five vicious-looking thugs assembled in a large moon, all glaring at Silk with hatred. He saw four of the blank-faced lieutenants in the front of the crowd. Marty and Hack, who held him, had the same expressionless faces. Kroner stood at one side, a mocking leer on his lips.

Then Silk's eyes fell upon the bound, black-clad figure sprawled on the floor at Kroner's feet and a groan tore from his lips. The sound awoke snarls of rage from the crowd.

"Wait!" Kroner stopped the demonstration with an upraised hand. "Presently you can have both of these enemies to handle as you like. Toss Kirby into a corner where he can watch now."

Silk was dragged over to the wall and turned so that he faced the crowd. At his back were long, heavy drapes that extended from floor to ceiling and appeared to mark the location of blanketed windows around the room. Then everyone forgot Silk in watching Kroner jerk the Black Bat to a sitting position, preparatory to lifting the hood.

Suddenly Silk stiffened and nearly cried aloud. The shadowy draperies behind him were stirring gently. Then a hand touched Silk's bound wrists, cold steel slid quietly between them and the cruel cords dropped away. The same thing was done with his bound ankles.

For a moment Silk thought he was losing his mind. With the Black Bat a helpless captive and Butch and Carol probably already in the hands of the mob, who could be aiding him? But despite his bewilderment, Silk retained his presence of mind and kept both hands and feet in the same position to conceal their sudden freedom from a casual glance. Behind the screen of his body, however, he was furiously flexing and working his fingers to restore circulation.

Whoever the mysterious benefactor might be, he or she had given Silk the opportunity he had prayed for—a chance to atone for his unwilling betrayal. He lay still, blessing the unknown ally, and pondering how he could do the most damage in the seconds before hot lead would blast the life from his body. With fatalistic calm, he estimated that the surprise of his sudden attack would hold the thugs paralyzed for perhaps thirty seconds.

Then Silk gulped as the unmistakable checkered butt of an automatic was slid gently into his right hand. He waited for further activity on the part of the invisible friend, but nothing happened.

CHAPTER XIX
Some Mysteries Solved

NEAR the front of the room, Kroner had delayed the unmasking while he bragged on his own prowess. Now he hooked an eager finger under the edge of the black mask.

"Men, meet the Black Bat!" With a quick jerk he tore the concealing hood away. "Otherwise known as To—"

His voice was drowned in rising cries that burst into howls of rage. Silk's eyes bulged as he stared at the brutal, unfamiliar face revealed by the unmasking. Whoever the man in the bat costume was, he definitely was *not* Tony Quinn.

"That ain't the Black Bat!" roared one of the thugs. "That's Lefty Riggs. We've been tricked!"

Silk leaped to his feet, unnoticed in the commotion that grew out of the amazing discovery. He was trembling with relief, filled with a surge of joy at knowing the Black Bat was still at large. There was no doubt in his mind, now, as to who had freed him and supplied the weapon so mysteriously.

The confusion in the room was deafening. The enraged mobsters were surging forward, yelling and cursing. Kroner and his blank-faced lieutenants were facing the, crowd, shouting for order.

Silence came so abruptly that the effect was startling. But it was no more startling than the cause of that shocked silencing of the angry clamor.

Behind Roger Kroner, the long draperies had suddenly swayed aside and there, against their lighter background, was the fearsome shadow of black wings. The silence was broken by howls of terror as the mob fell back. Kroner and his men whirled and froze.

"Thank you, gentlemen," the Black Bat said softly, moving his hands so that light glinted ominously from the twin guns he held. "You all deserve death, but I dislike depriving the law of its privileges. Raise your hands quietly and stand where you are. Silk, do you think you can collect their weapons without giving anyone a chance to use you for a shield?"

"Yes, sir," Silk declared joyously. raising his gun. "It would he a pleasure to have some of them try it. Keep your eye on Kroner, the red-

haired one, sir. He's the brains behind this gang."

"I know." The Black Bat smiled grimly. "I've had both eyes on our friend Kroner for some time, Silk. In fact, I know almost as much about his operations as he himself does—perhaps more, for I knew what was going to happen to them and he didn't. When your task is finished, we'll scrub some of that makeup off and see who Roger Kroner really is."

Silk started toward the glowering hoods, but stopped short as the outer door was suddenly slammed open. One of the thugs on guard outside raced in, so upset over some development that he completely failed to see the Black Bat or to realize that Silk was not one of the mob.

"Boss!" he shouted breathlessly. "Mike's car is just coming in the drive with a girl and a big moose of a guy in it and Flicker at the wheel. But the signal light's on in front. Maybe, somebody gunned Mike out and—"

He stopped, gaping, aware for the first time of the strained atmosphere. If he had looked to his right and seen the Black Bat, he would probably have instantly become a model prisoner.

INSTEAD, he looked to the left and saw Silk looking, except for the gun in his hand, like an inoffensive business man. With a snarl or rage, the guard jerked out his gun and triggered a snap-shot. The shot missed Silk by inches because one of the Black Bat's guns had barked an instant quicker, and the guard was dying when convulsing muscles jerked the trigger.

The sudden flurry of action was the spark that set off the tinder-box of pent up hatred. As the blended shots roared out, a dozen hands streaked for weapons. Kroner dropped to the floor to give his men a clear shot at the Black Bat.

In the spate of a heart-beat, the room rocked to the thunder of gunfire that was blasting from every side at Silk and the Black Bat.

The Black Bat's keenly tuned senses had warned him that his prisoners were about to break, an instant before that actually happened. That warning enabled him literally to outrun the hungry lead that was questing for his heart.

At the first flash of drawn weapons, he dropped down and to one side so that the slugs screamed harmlessly past. Simultaneously, his own guns spoke in unison. One sent a slug crashing into the head of a gunman who was taking aim at Silk's heart. The other blasted the light switch on the opposite wall, plunging the room into inky darkness and aborting all the lights in the house.

The blackness threw the thugs into blind, milling confusion and placed the balance of power back into the Black Bat's capable hands. Where the others could see nothing, the Black Bat's supernormal eyesight made the room almost as bright as day.

Some of the gunmen, in the grip of panic, were shooting blindly, filling the room with crisscross streams of death. Silk, as hampered by the dark as his enemies, was pressed to the wall with his gun ready to blast when a target appeared.

The Black Bat saw all this in the split second it took him to drop and roll away from his former position. He saw the blank-faced killers converging toward the front of the room and caught a glimpse of Kroner on hands and knees, scuttling toward the doorway.

The Black Bat's lips thinned as he raced forward, heedless of wild shots. The deadly mob leader must not be permitted to escape. But Kroner, evidently familiar enough with the room to keep his sense of direction in the dark, was almost to the outside door.

The Black Bat leveled one of his guns. He hated to fire, but Kroner must not go free. Just then three of the blank-faced lieutenants stumbled blindly between him and his target. The Black Bat groaned and leaped around them to stop the fleeing leader.

One of the blank-faced men stumbled and fell blindly against the Black Bat. They went down in a tangle of flailing limbs and weapons. Other killers, drawn by the sound, fell on the struggling pair. Muffled shots roared from the heap, accompanied by groans and curses. Instantly the thugs across the room began to shoot at the sound.

WHEN the Black Bat finally slipped free, the murderous Roger Kroner had vanished completely. The Black Bat bit off an exclamation of anger and spun back into the flame-racked room. Silk, his eyes now more accustomed to the darkness, was leaping and flailing at the shadowy figures that milled around him. The Black Bat leaped into the mêlée beside him, swinging both guns with deadly effect.

A knot of thugs broke free and streaked for the door just as a gigantic shadow loomed in the opening. The shadow emitted a bellow of pleasure in Butch's unmistakable voice and fell upon the startled crooks with smashing fists. Three went down in a groaning heap before the others could crowd through the doorway and escape.

In a matter of moments, only the Black Bat and his two aides remained on their feet. The floor was littered with forms that lay quiet or stirred painfully. The Black Bat drew Silk and Butch together and for a moment the three stood close, their emotions at being so miraculously reunited keeping them silent.

The Black Bat broke the silence.

"Carol? Is she—"

"Here!" Carol streaked through the doorway and flew into his arms. "I nearly got trampled in the mad rush when those men fled. Oh, darling. you'll never know what a night of agony this has been, thinking you were either dead or condemned to die, and that Silk was in the hands of the killers! I'm so happy I could cry."

"I guess we all feel pretty much that way, Carol," the Black Bat answered soberly. "But we aren't out of the woods yet, by any means, and before long this place is going to be overrun with police. Carol, you and Butch wait for me outside and be ready to duck if anyone appears. I want to examine these bodies before leaving, and I want to hear Silk's story while I work.

"You say only Kroner and those two who came with him knew my identity?" the Black Bat asked sharply when Silk had finished his report, being careful not to mention Tony Quinn's name, lest one of the injured men might hear. "Then those odds are cut still more. During the scrap one of your wild shots struck one of those two blank-faced men squarely in the head. The others carried his body with them when they fled. Let's get out of here. I've trademarked all these rats and I think I hear police sirens."

Butch and Carol met them outside. "I've got one of their cars parked outside, Boss," Butch whispered, "and one of those dead-pan leaders you wanted to examine is laid out in the back seat."

"Butch, you're a diamond in the rough. I already knew that those weird faces were the result of some ghastly type of face-lifting, but from what Silk learned there's something about the job that points straight at the killer. It's probably a technique in operating that any doctor could identify. We'll soon find out. I imagine the operation severed facial muscles, which is why their features never showed a trace of normal expression or emotion."

"Hey!" Butch exclaimed suddenly, grabbing she Black Bat's arm. "If them sirens are as close as they sound, we better scram in a hurry or a whole lot more than our emotions are going to show around here."

HALF an hour later Silk, minus his disguise, bustled happily into the little room at the end of the tunnel, wearing a broad grin and bearing a tray of glasses. Tony Quinn, once more dressed in the baggy tweeds, looked up curiously.

"What's that, Silk?"

"The Napoleon brandy, sir. We've been saving it for a celebration and personally, sir. I doubt if we've ever had a better reason to celebrate. We've all been practically snatched from the jaws of death and one of the three crooks who knew your identity was silenced forever tonight. In spite of the other two still being at large, I thought—"

"Silk, you thought perfectly right, as usual," Quinn assured him, "As a matter of fact, I doubt if we will ever find a better occasion to celebrate."

"Thank you, sir, but I shall never forget how I suffered, knowing that I was betraying all of you, yet unable to stop myself in any way. I'm afraid remembering that made me none too merciful in handling those crooks tonight."

"Forget it, Silk. Don't blame yourself for a single thing. Remember that any of us would have done the same under the influence of scopolamine and morphine. But let's not forget that our work is by no means ended. Let me hear what happened to each of you, tonight, in detail. I need every bit of information I can get to round out my own discoveries and conclusions. I don't dare accuse my particular suspect of being Roger Kroner until I have plenty of concrete evidence with which to back my statements. Silk, let's have your story."

Silk recounted his experiences from the time he had driven out to probe the accidents until his rescue by the Black Bat.

"I'm afraid, sir," he concluded, "that I failed in my chief mission. I still don't know why those horrible accidents were staged. Nor can I imagine how you found that meeting place tonight and appeared so opportunely. I thought my heart would snap when Kroner unmasked that phony Black Bat."

The Black Bat chuckled.

"It wasn't so difficult, once I succeeded in contacting a mob in action. When I saw the thugs looting the safety deposit box at the bank, I made a noise to draw their fire and then tossed down one of their own guards, knocked unconscious and dressed in my spare outfit. I was gambling that Kroner was the kind of egotist who would forbid anyone but himself to get first look at the Black Bat's face and my gamble succeeded. No one dared raise the hood to discover the trick.

"Then, while they were all centering attention on my double, I slipped back and fashioned a rope sling under the rear bumper of their car. I rode there, most uncomfortably, when they drove off and, as a result, learned the secret of those accidents for myself, Silk."

"You did?" Silk cried. "For heaven's sake, tell me."

"It isn't a nice story." The Black Bat's face darkened. "As a matter of fact, I suspected it before but the idea was so horrible and so fantastic that I couldn't make myself believe it possible. You remember, the police reported that the mobs vanished completely after each attack and that no one could trace their getaway?

"Well, the reason for that was that each time a mob struck, there was a carefully timed accident some-

where close by. At each accident, it was necessary to call an ambulance to carry off the dead and injured. Bus what no one guessed before was that the ambulance also halted long enough on the way to pick up the killers and carry them away, as well."

CAROL jumped up from her chair. "What?" she exclaimed, "You mean those mobs employed ambulances to transport them and their loot?"

"Exactly. No matter how tight a police cordon might be thrown around the scene of a crime, an ambulance bearing injured persons would always be passed through without a halt. That was the reason for that first wreck when the grocery clerk was murdered on South Highway. An ambulance raced to the scene and carried away not only the injured but also the three escaped convicts who were needed to complete Kroner's mob.

"That accident you saw tonight, Silk, apparently had a double purpose. The ambulance that answered the call not only dropped Morgan nearby for someone to find but on its return trip it picked up the gang that had just finished looting a jewelry shop a few blocks away."

"Tony," Carol exclaimed again, "I'm almost sorry you didn't kill every one of those fiends tonight, Instead of simply knocking some of them out and leaving them for the police. But how on earth did you discover all this?"

"The mob I was trailing tonight transferred themselves and their loot to an ambulance. I managed to jump on the back out of sight and follow them to where they let the thugs jump off near their headquarters. From their conversation during the transfer and the smooth way everything was handled I caught the whole ghastly scheme. If any of the injured were able to realize what was going on or possessed any damaging knowledge, they could conveniently die en route to the hospital. I suspect those ambulances that were wrecked tonight had been called to an accident by some unsuspecting witness whose interest was in saving lives, not snuffing them out. They were smashed to prevent their reaching the wrecks first and spoiling the game."

"But, Tony!" Carol cried. "That means some hospital—an institution of healing and mercy—dedicating itself to death and destruction! How horrible!"

"Not an entire hospital, Carol, but perhaps some ambulance drivers and internes on ambulance duty. Though it begins to look as though that discovery may lead to even more horrible disclosures.

"But we've got to hurry. Carol, let me skim through the notes you jotted down while looking up those doctors for me tonight. I believe the key to Roger Kroner's identity will be somewhere in them. Also, unless I miss my guess, we'll be wise to prepare for a visit from Captain McGrath before long, and so many things have happened uncomfortably close to home that his accusations may have teeth in them tonight."

CHAPTER XX
Narrow Escape

JUST half an hour later, Tony Quinn sat in his usual easy chair, toying with his cane and staring blankly at the wall, when the doorbell rang sharply. Silk went into the ball and returned a moment later with Captain McGrath and Commissioner Warner.

Before a word could be spoken, McGrath gave a bellow of triumph and charged across the room. He bent over Tony Quinn. There was a sharp double click and McGrath straightened, breathing hard, to show Quinn's wrists locked in handcuffs. Quinn raised his manacled wrists and shook them dazedly, an expression of hurt bewilderment on his scarred face.

"What—what is the meaning of this—these handcuffs on my wrists?" he whispered. "I don't understand. Captain McGrath, is that you? What are you—"

"'You bet it's me," McGrath roared again. "And those cuffs I've beep keeping especially for the Black Bat are practically laughing themselves to death. I've got you, Mr. Phony Quinn—right against the wall."

"Shut up, McGrath," Commissioner Warner snapped. "Right or wrong, your unbearable crowing at such a time is enough to turn a man's stomach. You might remember that an hour ago the Black Bat laid practically the entire killer mob, and a good share of its loot right in our laps."

Warner laid a hand on Quinn's shoulder, then dropped into a chair, wiping his drawn face with a hand that trembled. His eyes looked stricken.

"Commissioner," Quinn said, "I'm glad to hear your voice. Maybe you will take pity on a blind man and tell him what on earth this is all about."

"Blind man, my eye!" McGrath snorted.

"For longer than I care to remember, Tony," Warner said, wetting his lips uncomfortably, "McGrath has insisted you were the Black Bat, while I publicly called him a fool. Tonight, Tony, we got a riot call and found the back part of your estate, by your gatehouse, practically littered with unconscious thugs. Though none of them bore Black Bat stickers, their condition was obviously the work of the Black Bat or his aides and the location indicated more than mere accident.

"I'm not admitting it as evidence, Tony," Warner hurried on uncomfortably, "but I'm powerless to stop McGrath from using it as an excuse to hold

you, for a new eye examination. Being police commissioner means that I can't let personal feelings interfere with the investigations of my men when they uncover reasonable grounds for suspicion. Tony, you know how I feel, but—"

"Why, Commissioner," Quinn protested mildly. "Would you admit evidence as circumstantial as that?"

"Circumstantial—bah!" McGrath growled derisively.

Quinn's bewildered reply was cut off by the sharp ringing of the phone. Silk answered and then summoned McGrath. The beefy officer lifted the receiver and abruptly the cold cigar fell from his gaping mouth.

"Good evening, Captain," a voice said. "Are you annoying Quinn again by accusing him of being me? Shame on you, after I handed you those crooks and their loot tonight."

McGRATH jerked around to stare unbelievingly at Tony Quinn. Then he purpled and shook the phone.

"It's a trick!" he bawled. "You aren't the Black Bat. I dare you to come here in person and prove—"

"Come, come, Captain, I have important business. That's why I kept going after trailing you and the commissioner to Quinn's house. You'll find my calling card on your windshield where I left it in passing. Now let me talk to Warner."

"What is it, man?" Warner barked as McGrath reeled back, pointing a shaking hand at the phone. "A call for me?"

"The—the Black Bat," McGrath choked.

With an incredulous cry, Warner seized the phone.

"Hello, Commissioner," he heard, "I'm sorry I couldn't call you back earlier tonight to let you know that Egyptian collection would be safe, but I was rather occupied. By this time, you must have it back. I'm sure."

"Yes," Warner said hurriedly. "Yes, we found it with a lot of other loot in the house with those thugs."

"Then you won't mind doing me a favor, I'm sure. Especially if I promise to hand you the brains behind the killer mob."

"I'll do anything, Black Bat," Warner promised fervently.

He listened a few moments, while detailed instructions were given. When he cradled the phone and turned back, there was a new light in his eyes.

"It was a trick, wasn't it?" McGrath asked hopefully.

"Take off those cuffs," Warner snapped. "It was the Black Bat who phoned. He proved that by quoting a conversation we had earlier tonight. Tony, I could spend all the rest of this night apologizing to you, but there isn't time. The Black Bat is going to wind up this mess for me and I've a lot to do. Will you simply accept an apology?"

He thrust out his hand, only to blink in confusion when Tony Quinn ignored it, his blind eyes unwavering.

"Why, of course, Commissioner. I can see how bad it appeared, though I can't for the life of me see why those thugs should have fought near my gatehouse, as you say they did."

"It's over, anyhow, and we'll forget the whole thing. Good night, Tony, and you too, Silk. Come along, McGrath."

In the doorway, Commissioner Warner turned to stare at Quinn for a moment, his eyes puzzled. Finally he shook his head in bewilderment and hurried out.

As soon as it was safe to do so, Silk drew the shades and opened the secret room behind the fireplace. The panel swinging out disclosed an amazing scene. Butch and Carol, hand in hand, were dancing around and around a small electric phonograph that was connected through a cup-shaped device to the transmitter of a telephone.

"Tony, it was perfect!" Carol exulted. "Butch stood by to ad lib any time McGrath or Warner got off the subject, but not an extra word was necessary. You guessed everything they would say, almost word for word, and this recording you made of your own voice sounded like the most natural conversation in the world."

"I'll admit I was worried for a time, though." Quinn smiled. "But fortunately, it worked out all right."

"Warner still thinks it was a trick," Silk remarked. "But he isn't a bit sorry. What do we do now, sir?"

"You three may as well dig up some good dance records and keep my phonograph going. You're going to be shut out from the rest of the action tonight, I'm happy to say. I'm going out now and expose Roger Kroner. Turn your back, Carol, while Tony Quinn dons the Black Bat's pants."

TWO hard-faced men in white jackets sat beside a glistening ambulance in the Carron Hospital garage, playing cards. One had just fanned out a triumphant hand across the table when the telephone rang. He grunted sourly, crossed the room and lifted the receiver.

"Forty-first and Laurel," a voice growled in his ear. "Roll that crate and never mind the siren."

"Wait!" the hard-faced man cried. "Who is this?"

"Mike."

"Mike? Where the blazes have you been? The boss has been having kittens for fear the cops—"

"Button your trap and hurry, you idiot!" the voice rasped.

The hard-faced ambulance interne slammed up the telephone and shouted at his companion.

"Jump, Bugs! It's Mike, and he wants a pickup. He must have got away from the cops or been lying low. He says not to use the siren so he probably means he didn't have time to fake a wreck."

A moment later the sleek ambulance shot out of the garage and whirled northward through streets that were almost deserted at that late hour. At their destination, the white car stopped and both men leaped out, racing around to open the rear doors and snatch out a rolled stretcher. Then they halted blankly.

"Well," Bugs demanded, staring around at the silent street, "where is he? You sure you got the address right, Pinky?"

"Sure I did," Pinky growled nervously. "Let's comb these bushes. Maybe he had a slug in him and passed out."

The two walked anxiously up the dark street. Hardly had their backs turned when a black shadow drifted from a clump of shrubbery and darted into the ambulance. When the two returned, empty-handed and bewildered, the Black Bat was well hidden in a niche directly behind the driver's seat.

It had been the Black Bat's voice that had lured them to this spot, Silk had reported the fact that the blank-faced man assigned to seize Butch had been named Mike. Thanks to Butch's accuracy in pitching a machine-gun, Mike now was permanently out of circulation. The mystery of his failure to report probably had Kroner more than a little worried. It was the Black Bat's hope that the bewildered ambulance internes would rush straight to Kroner to report the fake call, thus leading him to his quarry.

"I don't like it," Bugs growled as the ambulance swung into motion. "Maybe somebody's wise to the whole set-up."

"How could they be, dope?" Pinky snorted, "Nobody could catch onto this ambulance trick in a million years. We answer legitimate calls, we carry injured people, and we make plenty sure nobody's looking when we slow down for the mob to hop on and off. And we make sure the guys we pick up from wrecks ain't in condition to squeal. Who could know? The Chief covers up too well. Why, we work in the same hospital with him and we don't even know who he is! He could be any one of five docs I could name—and probably ain't. He slips that disguise on and off in the closet before he opens the resort door and his own brother wouldn't recognize him."

THE interne known by the euphonious name of Bugs shivered.

"I don't want to know who he is," he said. "You saw how he carved Dopey. Only what I don't like is that outside of Connie and those other guys whose mugs he fixed, you and I are the only ones who know where the resort is. The other lugs only know about those meeting places around town and they think we just get paid to pick 'em up and drop 'em. They know the frozen-faced guys have a spot somewhere, but they don't know where."

"So what?" Pinky growled. "The boss trusts us. He even smashed the other ambulances so we'd get all the calls while the raids were on, didn't he? What you griping about?"

"Only this, Pinky. D'you think Kroner'll risk letting us go out and maybe get plastered and shoot our faces some day? He knows he'd never be safe with us alive to spill what we know."

Further conversation was lost to the Black Bat's sharp ears as the ambulance was parked in its stall and the two got out to report their return. The Black Bat remained motionless, digesting the information he had overheard. Most of it was only confirmation of what he already knew. But some supplied pieces still missing from his reconstruction of the crime pattern.

CHAPTER XXI
Ambulance Call

KRONER was a Carron staff physician, so obviously the mysterious "resort" was somewhere close to the hospital. That much the Black Bat knew now. There remained only to locate that spot, where the remnants of the mob were probably hiding even now, to learn the reason for those weird blank faces—and to unmask Kroner.

A tight smile touched the Black Bat's lips. He had to smash Kroner's empire of crime, even though the Black Bat's own career might be crushed in the same wreckage.

He heard the mumble of the voices of the internes, moving across the floor, chopped off as a door banged. Instantly the Black Bat was out of his hiding place, racing toward the door through which the two had vanished. He felt sure that this Bugs and Pinky would lose no time in reporting the fake call to Kroner, thereby unwittingly leading the Black Bat straight to his quarry.

The door led onto a service driveway and the Black Bat's abnormal sight picked out the two figures hurrying toward the street. He frowned as he flitted in pursuit. He had fully expected the two to head straight into the hospital.

Invisible in the thick shadows, the Black Bat trailed his unsuspecting guides across the street and down the block to a big house that sat back from the street on a lawn well masked by shrubbery.

There were no lights visible in the house but the two walked unhesitatingly to the front door, pushed it open and vanished inside.

The Black Bat paused outside the door, in puzzled thought. If this was the mob's headquarters, there was a singular lack of watchfulness. He had been close enough to see that no one met the two at the door, nor had the door appeared to be even locked.

He started to creep closer, and froze as a muffled cry of terror burst from inside the dark house, followed instantly by the thunder of two shots. The Black Bat leaped forward, gun in hand, and opened the front door. A dim light was on now, and in its glow he saw the bodies of the two internes sprawled on the floor in widening pools of crimson.

Over them stood one of the blank-faced killers, gun in hand. He whirled at the sound of the opening door and fired with nervous haste. The hiss of the slug past the Black Bat's ear was lost in the thunder of his own weapon answering. The killer dropped his gun and went down, clawing at a shattered chest.

For the first time, the Black Bat got a look at the killer's face, hideously blank even in the man's death agonies. A sharp breath hissed through his set teeth. The gunman was Marty, the only surviving mobster besides Kroner himself who knew the Black Bat's identity.

But there was no time to exult. Guns in hand the Black Bat hurdled the bodies and raced through a doorway beyond, expecting at any moment to meet the remnants of the mob. He ran down a hallway, past empty rooms, to the big kitchen at the rear. There he halted. He had seen no one, nor could his keen hearing detect a whisper of movement in the house. The back door was bolted from the inside, evidence that no one had fled that way at the sound of the shots.

THE Black Bat's eyes narrowed in puzzled thought. Had the mob abandoned this spot, leaving Marty behind to eliminate the two hirelings who had served their purpose? The Black Bat knew, now, who Roger Kroner was and where he could be seized when the time came, but it was almost equally important to find and stamp out the vicious survivors of his mob.

He turned, and a faint knife-edge of light from beneath a closed door caught his eye. He drifted across the kitchen and eased the door open, staring down a flight of steps into a big, brightly lighted basement, feeling a stir of excitement in his veins. The fact that the light was on indicated that Marty or someone else had recently been down there.

Creeping down the steps, the Black Bat surveyed the empty basement. Except for heavily muffled windows, he could see nothing suspicious. Then his eyes fell on two rows of faint, wavy lines showing faintly across the concrete floor.

He bent over the lines and felt a tingle of excitement as he saw that they were the damp tracks of small rubber tires. That dovetailed with Silk's experience of being carried through a damp tunnel on a wheeled cart.

The Black Bat raced across to where the tracks seemed to vanish under the basement wall. A moment's search disclosed a smudged patch in one corner where hands had pressed against the plaster. He laid his gloved hand on the smudge and pushed.

With a faint whirr, an entire section of the wall slid back to reveal a large automatic elevator. A moment later, he was cautiously stepping out of the elevator into a long, dimly lighted tunnel that had been constructed several feet below basement level.

Like a black ghost the Black Bat drifted along the tunnel, both guns ready to blast at the first sign of the killers. His eyes narrowed as he realized the direction in which his trip was taking him. Unless his sense of location was completely upset, this tunnel ran nearly a full block from this house straight back to the west wing of Carron Hospital.

Abruptly the tunnel, ended at another blank wall but the push of a button brought a second elevator into view. Although he knew that certain death might be waiting above, the Black Bat stepped into the elevator and sent it whirring upward.

The elevator halted before a section of blank wall and the Black Bat tensed, lifting his guns. Before he could move to hunt for a control button, the wall slid aside with startling abruptness. Beyond the opening, the blank-faced Connie blew out a mouthful of smoke.

"You took long enough, Marty," he growled. "Did you fix them two saps so they won't squeal or come belly-achin' for a cut of the—*The Black Bat!*"

He fairly shrieked the last words as belated recognition sent his hand streaking toward his holstered gun. Gun thunder rocked the elevator for a moment. Then Connie was falling upon his own gun, dying, with the Black Bat's slug in his warped brain.

The echoes were still clattering when the Black Bat sprang over Connie's slumped figure and into a scene so fantastic that it stunned him.

HE was in a big room that had once been a hospital ward. But now the room more closely resembled the lounge of an exclusive club. Indirect lights threw a soft glow over luxurious couches and deeply upholstered chairs, over card and pool tables, gambling paraphernalia and tables littered with the latest magazines. A row of beds along one wall bulked luxuriously under satin spreads. Through a door beyond, the Black Bat could see a

row of shower stalls, massage tables and the glare of sun-tan lamps.

The Black Bat saw all this in a single split second glance. Then his entire attention was held by the occupants of the place that he knew must be the mysterious "resort."

Nine men were in the place, playing cards or relaxing on couches and chairs. Three were the surviving blank-faced lieutenants. The remainder were hard-faced thugs, several of whom the Black Bat recognized as wanted killers. The faces of two were swathed in bandages.

At the Black Bat's startling entrance, all nine whirled around for an instant of stunned, gaping paralysis, and then went for their guns. In a moment, lead was screaming from all sides at crime's deadliest enemy.

But the Black Bat was already in motion, streaking toward the comparative safety of a nearby door, both guns snarling flame and death. The door opened into a small closet with no other means of exit and the killers surged forward with howls of triumph as they saw their enemy being driven toward an inescapable trap.

Their triumph was short-lived, however. Halfway to the closet, one of the Black Bat's guns tilted and flamed toward the ceiling. Instantly the lights went out as wires shorted, blinding the thugs. At the moment darkness fell, the Black Bat raced toward a bulky couch. From that shelter his keen eyes pierced the blackness, watching the thugs tumble over each other in a blind rush to blockade the closet.

For a moment the guns were silenced and in that silence, all ears caught a new sound—the sudden crash of pile-driver blows against the outer doors and the shouts of several men. Then, as the thugs milled in helpless uncertainty, the door crashed open and spotlights pinned them in their revealing glare.

"Up!" bellowed the unmistakable voice of Captain McGrath. "Get 'em up and drop those guns! For the luva Mike, Commissioner, look who we got! There's Franky Boyer and Gigi Watts and Hooknose Haskell. And there's Joe Martini and his pal, Slug Baltz. What a haul!"

Bewildered and cowed by the swift disaster, the thugs dropped their guns and elevated their hands. Immediately blue-coated figures moved forward to snap handcuffs and herd them out into the lighted corridor. McGrath and Warner remained in the darkened room, momentarily dazed.

"Boy!" McGrath chortled at last. "That pinch'll give me just about the biggest score anybody ever run up down at Headquart ... *Glug!"*

THE strangled break in his speech was occasioned by something round and cold and unmistakably lethal that attached itself to his neck just behind one ear.

"You wouldn't hog all the credit, would you, Captain?" a soft voice asked from the darkness close behind him.

"The Black Bat!" McGrath roared. "I knew you'd be sneaking around here somewhere!"

"Almost psychic, aren't you?" the Black Bat chuckled. "That's a remarkable deduction, since I tipped you off to come here. How about it? Will you declare a truce so I won't have to disarm you while we talk?"

"Okay," McGrath growled reluctantly. "But only for twenty minutes. After that, I'm nailing you if it's the last thing I do!"

"Power to you, Captain." The Black Bat laughed, "Good evening, Commissioner. You're so quiet, you must be stunned."

"I am, Black Bat," Warner admitted. "Finding all those killers here, in the city's biggest hospital, is almost more than I can swallow."

"Then I suggest you flash your lights around and get a real surprise."

"Wh-why," McGrath gasped, as the beam showed up the luxurious furnishings. "It looks like the Ritz-Valmore lobby."

"This," the Black Bat said grimly, "was probably the world's most elegant hideout for wanted crooks. They paid plenty to live here in luxury and. until now, perfect safety. You'll find 'the resort,' as they called this place for excellent reason, also dealt in treatment of gunshot wounds, face-lifting, fingerprint changing, drug sales to its guests, and was a safe spot to cache kidnap victims. But its main purpose was as campaign headquarters for the killer mob's blank-faced lieutenants and their chief who calls himself Roger Kroner."

"The dirty crooks!" McGrath howled. "I'll pinch the whole blasted hospital! I'll nab every doc and nurse and—"

"I wouldn't," the Black Bat warned. "You'd let yourself in for some nice lawsuits. It happens this whole enterprise was run by one man, unknown to anyone else here except two crooked ambulance internes he used and then murdered."

CHAPTER XXII

Death at the Resort

UNASSUMINGLY the Black Bat sketched the operation of the killer mobs for Commissioner Warner and Captain McGrath. He told of their use of ambulances and their plans to loot the market with information gained through the use of truth serum on financiers.

"When the police traced the market raids to Roger Kroner, as they eventually would," he

explained, "he could simply change his disguise and continue operations under some other name. But the biggest advantage in his disguise lay right here. Look!"

He took McGrath's flashlight and swung it toward the narrow passage between the two sets of doors that blocked off the wing from the main corridor. In this narrow space, a cleverly concealed drawer lay open, exposing a red wig, eye-caps and cheek pads.

"Coming into the resort," the Black Bat explained, "he locked the outer door and donned his disguise. Then he unlocked the inner door and faced his thugs as Roger Kroner. Upon leaving, he left the disguise here before stepping back into the corridor outside as himself—the self his men never saw."

"But people must have seen this room," Warner protested. "At least internes and scrub women."

"No, that part was fool-proof. He was supposed to be treating and studying lepers down here, which was enough to make everyone give this wing a wide berth."

"But all them crooks running in and out—" McGrath began.

"They weren't. The mob of hirelings never saw this spot or knew it existed, and the fugitives he harbored were glad to stay out of sight. Only the blank-faced lieutenants moved around much and they used the tunnel to come and go through that house a block away. Two ambulance internes who knew the secret were killed tonight to close their mouths for good."

"What about those blank-faced men?" Warner asked.

"They were big-shot crooks, masters in different branches of crime, with their faces operated on—the skin stretched and the muscles cut to give that expressionless, frozen appearance."

"But why, Black Bat? They couldn't hope to stay in hiding forever and we'd spot those faces a mile away. It isn't sensible."

"It was sensible to Kroner," the Black Bat said grimly. "He tricked those men, to force them to stay loyal. He promised to alter their faces so completely that they couldn't be recognized, but he was afraid they might double-cross him and snatch the loot of those big jobs. So instead, he created those ghastly blank faces and promised to fix new features only after the crime plan was finished."

"He must be a devil," Warner breathed. "But why were they so afraid to let us even get hold of a dead body?"

"Because Kroner, to use his criminal name, unintentionally autographed every face by using a new operating technique he himself had just developed. No one else knew the technique except his chief, Dr. Aker.

"He didn't learn, until too late, that Aker had mailed a full report of the technique to the medical association. Aker had discovered something—we may never know what—that aroused his suspicions to the point of advertising for my help, but he was murdered before we established contact. Kroner's plans were too far along to be stopped, then, so he aimed for a quick clean-up and threatened horrible tortures to any hood who let one of the leaders be taken, dead or alive."

COMMISSIONER WARNER interrupted excitedly.

"You mean," he cried, "that those thugs we just captured have scars that will identify and convict the brains of the mob? Where is he? Let's grab him, quick."

"You already have, I hope." the Black Bat said calmly. "Did the plans I suggested work out right?"

"Exactly as you predicted," Warner answered, his eyes widening. "We put that fake announcement on the radio that Dr. Kyle had been named hospital chief and that his first patient was to be Dr. Robbins' wife for an emergency operation. We'd hardly hidden ourself outside Dr. Kyle's office when Dr. Robbins rushed in, threatened him, and pulled a gun. Then in came Dr. Wetherell, all excited about the same announcement. Just then we heard the shooting, so we left one of McGrath's men on guard and rushed down here."

"I was sure that wherever Robbins was hiding," the Black Bat mused, "that he'd be listening to news of the killer mobs and would show up fast when he heard his wife was ill. All right, let's go."

He was glad for the moment that darkness hid the bitter lines in his face. When he unmasked Kroner, the killer would retaliate by unmasking the Black Bat. It was hard to face the end of this trail, yet satisfying to know that end spelled the finish of the most fiendishly clever criminal the city had ever known. He sighed and followed Warner and McGrath.

As they entered Dr. Kyle's office, Dr. Robbins leaped to his feet to shake a trembling fist in the Black Bat's masked face.

"You—you!" he sputtered. "You're responsible for luring me here to virtual arrest—for frightening me half to death!"

"Sit down!" McGrath roared, purple-faced. "You'll get worse than that if you're messed up in this."

THE Black Bat drew a deep breath and leaned against the door.

"He isn't," he said quietly. "Dr. Renwood Kyle, alias Roger Kroner, will you save a lot of unnecessary trouble by giving a full confession of your guilt?"

"Me?" Dr. Kyle bounded to his feet, white-faced and trembling. "Why, you're insane—mad! Of all. the stupid—"

The Black Bat stemmed the flood of vituperation with a lifted hand. There was a new and unbelievable weariness in his voice.

"Let's not go through all that. I have reports from this hospital showing that you have had exclusive use of the west wing for special research. Your own killers are living evidence that will send you to the chair. Yours wasn't the kind of crime scheme that needed small bits of evidence piled up to smash it. You either won or lost in one grand smash. Fortunately for the world, you lost. Will you lose gracefully?"

Despite their shocked amazement, Warner and McGrath and the blue-coat they had left on guard drew guns and centered them on the trapped, snarling figure behind the desk.

"But why?" Warner whispered dazedly. "Why should a surgeon with his reputation turn to crime?"

"Dr. Robbins knows the answer to that," the Black Bat replied. "Will you explain, Doctor?"

Robbins was staring at his colleague with shocked eyes. "Drugs," he said hoarsely. "I caught Dr. Kyle taking dope before an operation and saw that he was a hopeless addict. That is worse than murder for a doctor. I told him that unless he refused the post of chief and resigned at once, I'd be forced to expose him to the board. Instead, he phoned me at my house last night and threatened me, as you heard, Black Bat. I was starting out to call on the Hospital Board when you appeared. That gun I was carrying was for defense, in case he tried to make good his threats to stop my talking.

"I knew drug fiends were not morally responsible, but I never dreamed of this. Even when he sent one of his killers to murder me that night, I didn't connect him with this horrible crime business. I guess I was too upset to think clearly. I only knew my life was in danger, so I went into hiding until I could figure a way to straighten things out. I—I'm sorry I didn't trust you then, Black Bat, but I wasn't sure who you were, so I changed hotels to be safe."

"I didn't trust you for quite awhile either, Dr. Robbins," the Black Bat said, "so that makes us even. I was suspicious of you when I listened to you make an appointment with Bradney, then you didn't show up, but the killer mob did, and—"

"I did show up," Dr. Robbins broke in, "but when I ran into all that excitement, shooting and all, in front of Bradney's house. What could you expect me to do but get away—fast?"

"I know," said the Black Bat. "I know now, but it looked suspicious. I know now that killers had been planted around Bradney's house in the hope that you would try to get in touch with him, because under the influence of the scopolamine he had told Kroner—Kyle—that ..."

A wild, animal snarl of laughter burst from Kyle's writhing lips. He reached into a desk drawer.

"You weren't sure who the Black Bat was, eh, Robbins?" he cried. "Nobody's sure who the Black Bat is—except me. I know, and now I'll have the satisfaction of putting him behind bars before I go."

McGrath and Warner lifted their guns and tensed at his movement.

"Go ahead and shoot," he challenged. "I played my game and lost. You don't think I'd go through a trial and those months of waiting, do you? I've got my own way out—had it planned from the beginning! But first, let me introduce the terrible Black Bat, who is none other than—"

As he spoke, his hand came out of the drawer holding a metallic cylindrical object that glistened. What happened then was pure reflex movement on the part of Captain McGrath, the instinct of a trained man-hunter. McGrath caught a fleeting glimpse of the cylindrical object being jerked from the drawer and thought it was a gun with which the killer hoped to make a break. He was not even conscious of his own finger squeezing the trigger of his gun until a shot blasted and the slug drove Dr. Kyle's words back into his battered throat.

There was a moment of horrible, echoing silence as the killer toppled forward across the desk where he had plotted his fiendish crimes. McGrath stared at the body for a stricken moment, then whirled toward the doorway behind him. But the Black Bat had vanished as silently as a wraith.

McGrath turned slowly back. He looked at the body of Dr. Renwood Kyle, alias Roger Kroner. He looked at the long, fully charged hypodermic syringe that had fallen from the doctor's dead hand. It was this syringe, undoubtedly filled with deadly poison with which Dr. Kyle intended to take his own life, that McGrath had mistaken at first glance for a gun.

Last of all McGrath turned to face Commissioner Warner who was standing motionless, quietly holstering his own gun.

"If you think I'm sorry," McGrath growled softly, "you're badly mistaken. He had it coming—and there'll always be another chance to grab the Black Bat."

THE END

Coming in Black Bat #9: The Voice of Doom and The Black Bat's Invisible Enemy

THE BELFRY by Will Murray

This exciting volume of the Black Bat's adventures opens with the third and final story believed to be the work of Norvell W. Page, who wrote the majority of the *Spider* pulp stories for Popular Publications.

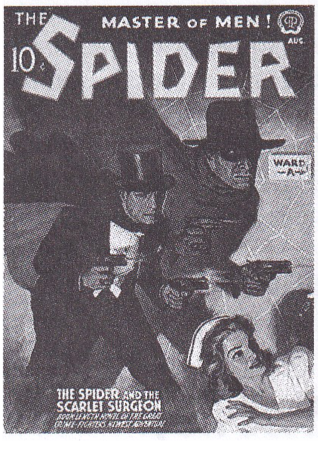
The Black Bat's Summons appeared in the July 1941 issue of *Black Book Detective*. Its background is unusual—the medical field. But this was something that Page had been exploiting in *The Spider* during this period. Two *Spider* stories—*The Spider and the Slave Doctor* and *The Spider and the Scarlet Surgeon*—also delved into hospital settings and rogue medical professionals that same year. In fact, *The Spider and the Scarlet Surgeon* landed on newsstands the month before *The Black Bat's Summons*.

This alone does not indicate, nor even prove, that Page is the author behind this exciting tale. But it reads even more like him than the previous suspect novels, *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* and *The Black Bat's Dragon Trail*.

Numerous instances of the stylistic quirks found in Page's *Spider* stories show clearly. One wonders if readers who followed both series noticed that G. Wayman Jones sounded suspiciously like the equally mythical Grant Stockbridge that month.

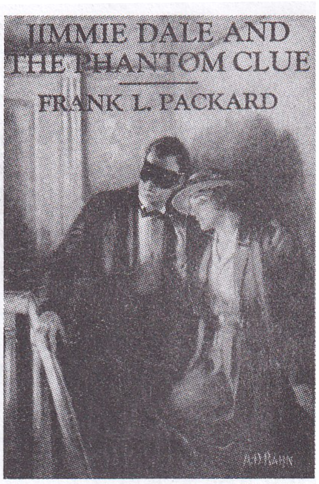
As with those prior stories, the mysterious author appears confused about the names of the series' subordinate characters. Here again, Carol Baldwin is renamed Carol Hastings. Once more, Norton "Silk" Kirby is incorrectly called Kirby Norton. Jack "Butch" O'Leary manages to keep his own name intact for a change. Amazingly, for the third time the Standard Magazine copy editors failed to correct this egregious oversight. We have corrected these errors for this Sanctum Books edition.

Early in the Black Bat's career, the character had the habit of placing paper stickers of a black bat silhouette on the bodies of the criminals he killed. Over in *The Spider*, Richard Wentworth pressed a special cigarette lighter against their foreheads, leaving behind the vermillion seal of the *Spider*. Both of these conventions began with Frank L.



Norvell W. Page

Frank L. Packard



Packard's post turn-of-the-century mystery-thriller character, Jimmie Dale, alias the Gray Seal. Dale left diamond-shaped gray paper stickers at the scenes of his depredations. Unlike the *Spider* and the Black Bat, Jimmie Dale abhorred killing, but he belonged to a previous generation, not the one that had seen the horrors of World War I.

However, the Gray Seal—whose adventures were still being published into the 1930s—inspired and influenced the generation of pulp writers who created the great crime-fighting heroes of the Depression. Walter B. Gibson of Shadow fame and Norvell Page himself admitted this salutary influence.

Here, the Bat sets his spread-winged bat stickers on the foreheads of the crooks he guns down—and there are many of them. Another unmistakable indicator of Norvell Page's ruthless hand.

Even the portrayal of Tony Quinn smacks of Richard Wentworth's passionate crusade against crime. It's not difficult to imagine Page turning out this story and seeing his own black-cloaked two-gun *Spider* in his mind's eye.

Also emulating his *Spider* series where Wentworth and Commissioner Stanley Kirkpatrick were close, Page gives Commissioner Jerome Warner a prominent place in this story, and their ofttimes uneasy relationship is mirrored herein.

To complete the connection, *Spider* cover artist Raphael DeSoto returns to paint the cover for this issue of *Black Book Detective*. One imagines Norvell Page smiling wryly when he saw it. Coincidentally, DeSoto also did the cover to the first suspected Page Black Bat novel. This marks his final Black Bat cover illustration.

It's worth mentioning that one of the reasons for so many medical-themed stories in *The Spider* and *Black Book Detective* in 1941 was the surging popularity of MGM's Dr. Kildare B-movies starring Lew Ayres, which were at the height of their popularity in 1940-41. The character was the creation of superprolific pulp writer "Max Brand," in reality Frederick Faust.

For our second feature, we jump ahead three years to Norman Daniels' excellent *The White Witch*. This story appeared in the Spring 1944 issue of *Black Book Detective*, after having been turned in during July of 1943.

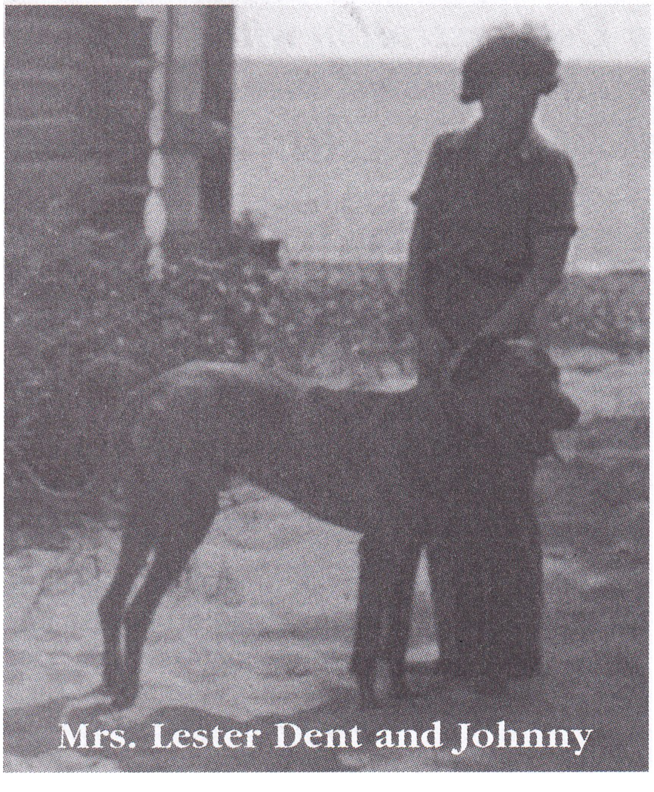
Here, Daniels revisits a theme he had explored a few years earlier in 1940's *The Black Bat's Crusade*. There, it was voodoo. Here, it's witchcraft!

This story follows the previously reprinted *Markets of Treason* wherein Captain McGrath gifts Tony Quinn a seeing-eye dog named Gwendolyn, who is trained to attack any man wearing a batwing-shaped cloak. This forces Quinn to abandon for his self-protection that emblematic portion of his Black Bat disguise. Gwendolyn appears in this story in a lesser role, but would cease to be mentioned after this installment. Apparently, her job was done.

The choice of a Great Dane is interesting. The Shadow briefly partnered with a Great Dane named Vulcan in one 1940 novel, *Crime at Seven Oaks*, but plans to make the massive dog a semi-recurring character fell through when cover artist Graves Gladney had trouble with the guard dog originally selected for a model. Since the Black Bat followed in the footsteps of The Shadow in so many ways, having a Great Dane of his own seems appropriate.

Back in those days, pulp writer Steve Fisher owned a gigantic specimen of the breed named Johnny. When Fisher left New York City for Hollywood in the late 1930s, he gifted the dog to fellow pulpster William G. Bogart, who later surrendered the oversized animal to another Doc Savage writer, Lester Dent.

It's entirely possible that Norman Daniels may have encountered Johnny during the canine's Manhattan sojourn, and that Johnny inspired Gwendolyn. But that is only a theory, and one unprovable at this late date.



Mrs. Lester Dent and Johnny

The great Rudolph Belarski painted the cover to this story and it is one of the best in the series. Belarski painted relatively few early *Black Book Detective* covers, but every one glowed with a luminous magic that was the talented artist's alone. Intriguingly, the Black Bat is shown wearing his trademark, and only recently discarded, cloak.

Rudolph Belarski

Why the Thrilling editors would decree that such a distinctive element be discarded is a puzzle. Perhaps they were attempting to distinguish their character from The Shadow and Batman. Earlier, the Black Bat had worn a hat over his scar-concealing hood, but that Shadowesque headgear was soon discarded. A legal truce existed between DC Comics' Batman and Thrilling since their near-simultaneous 1939 debuts, but confusion over their numerous similarities may have continued.

If so, the move flew in the face of Batman cocreator Bob Kane's thinking. He once observed, "I thought that the bat costume would frighten the denizens of the underworld. I mean, this awesome figure all in black, with bat wings, scared the hell out of them, and I figured the Batman would have an advantage right there."

Despite this decision, the Black Bat continued to appear in full regalia on *Black Book Detective* covers into 1947 before finally fading from memory.

In the story you're about to read, a new district attorney is introduced. His name is Paul Corday and he offers Tony Quinn the position of assistant district attorney. Quinn had been practicing law since losing his sight, which had cost him his job as the city's D.A. Now he once more has an official position from which to operate in his midnight campaign against crime. Before long, Quinn would be designated as "Special" D.A., and his crime-busting activities would occupy his days as well as his nights in the years to come.

While the brief era of Norvell Page has come to an end, a year in the future another prolific pulpster will step into the picture to pinch-hit for Norman Daniels. We'll get into his identity in a future *Black Bat* volume. •

As Quinn turned, one man struck Mrs. Millard and the other snatched the diamond. (CHAPTER X)

THE WHITE WITCH

By G. WAYMAN JONES

When a Master Hypnotist Stages a Demonstration with the Grim Reaper in the Audience, Tony Quinn is Hurled into the Midst of a Bizarre Crime Mystery That Calls Upon All His Powers!

CHAPTER I
Power

IT WAS a select gathering which filled the theatre to greet Jules Ledoux. This was no ordinary performance or lecture. It was a test, and a proof, of sheer power. On the stage were four gently swinging trapezes. Nothing else. Brilliant lights flooded the stage and audience.

Two white-bearded scientists stood at the back of the theatre, talking quietly.

"I do not believe it," one said. "Jules Ledoux is only seeking publicity for his cult, or whatever he calls it."

"Perhaps." The other shrugged. "There is also his castle at Limerock which must have cost a pretty penny. The audience is here tonight strictly by invitation, but if some of the people present can be convinced Ledoux is as great as he claims to be, there will be plenty of money."

"It is sheer nonsense," the first scientist scoffed. "Ledoux is said to have the power to compel anyone to do almost anything. That is hypnotism—out-and-out hypnotism."

"Unless his victims do something which is wholly against their nature," said his companion. "A hypnotized person will not murder anyone, for instance, unless he is a murderer at heart. We shall see."

They walked down the aisle and took their seats.

Two other men who had been standing close by, had listened to every word. One of these was brand-new district attorney Paul Corday. He was white-haired, handsome, and on the stuffed shirt side.

His companion reeked detective, from square-toed shoes to the derby clamped securely on his head, and his well-groomed mustache. In his pocket was a badge labeled "Captain of Detectives" and his name was McGrath.

"It's bunk, D. A.," Captain McGrath said. "Clear bunk."

Paul Corday favored McGrath with a frown.

"Please address me as Mr. Corday or Mr. District Attorney. Remember that, Captain."

"Yes, sir," McGrath gulped. "What do you think of this guy Ledoux? Is he a crook?"

"That is what we have come to find out, Captain. Leave the brain work to me. I brought you along only to make an arrest, if I deem it advisable. Otherwise, please be quiet."

McGrath said something under his breath and thought back upon other district attorneys he'd liked to work with. Certainly Corday was not going to make any deep impression upon the Police Department.

A BRASS gong sounded with such volume that everyone grimaced. Then a short, rotund man stepped from the wings and walked to the center of the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "the performance is about to begin. I am David Hoffman, manager for Mr. Jules Ledoux. Believe me, what you shall see will amaze you no less than it has amazed me. You have been invited because of your intelligence, standing and open-mindedness. Nothing like this has ever been done before. I hope you will leave us having faith in the teachings and the power of Jules Ledoux. Thank you."

Hoffman extended a hand toward the right wing and a man in immaculate evening clothes walked out. He was handsome enough to bring flutters from some of the women. He was over six feet and perfectly built. Clean shaven, with bright, almost burning eyes, he affected none of the trappings that go with mystics.

As he stepped to the center of the stage, the buzz of conversation ceased, Jules Ledoux held his audience spellbound.

"My good friends," he said, in a firm voice that carried to all parts of the theatre, "before we begin the little exhibition, I want to impress upon you the fact that I am no magician. I do not possess hypnotic powers. What I shall present is will power. The power of mind over matter. So that you will not believe what I am so do is prepared, with my own assistants as subjects. I request that anyone from the audience come on to the stage with me. I only insist that this representative be a man."

District Attorney Corday nudged Captain McGrath.

"That's your cue. Go up there. See if he can fool you."

"Me?" McGrath gasped. "Oh, no, I get stage fright."

"You take orders from the district attorney, don't you?" Corday snapped, "Obey them then."

McGrath, with a hang-dog expression, walked slowly down the aisle. He climbed the steps to the stage and was welcomed by Ledoux, as several hundred pairs of eyes watched.

"To prove," Ledoux said, "that you are not of my organization, will you please identify yourself, Captain?"

"Yeah—sure." McGrath would rather have faced six machine-gun armed crooks. "I'm Captain ... Hey, how'd you know I was a captain?"

Ledoux smiled suavely. "Quite simple, Captain. When you shook hands with me, you were repeating to yourself that you are captain of detectives and I could not harm you."

"Oh!" McGrath said. "Well, I am. Headquarters Squad. I never saw you before in my life. I—Hey, how'd you know what I was thinking?"

Ledoux laughed, "I read your mind, Captain McGrath. Now shall we get on with the show?"

McGrath licked his lips. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Start from this point, walk briskly straight across the stage and do not look to either side—only directly ahead."

McGrath shrugged and started walking. He walked with shoulders thrown back, head high and was a little unnaturally stiff. After he took three steps Ledoux silently fell in behind him.

Ledoux threw his shoulders back, kept his head high just like McGrath. His paces were matched with those of the detective captain, but McGrath had no idea he was being closely followed. When they were within a dozen feet of the opposite wing, Ledoux suddenly threw himself backward, as if about to fall.

At precisely the same instant, McGrath did the same thing, It was involuntary, unrehearsed, McGrath lost his balance and toppled backward with a thump that sent up a cloud of dust from the stage floor.

LEDOUX had not fallen. He skillfully twisted his body, regained his balance, and helped McGrath to his feet.

"May I ask what happened, Captain?" he asked sweetly. "There are no obstructions. You didn't stumble. You became top heavy and fell backwards."

"I—don't know what happened," McGrath frowned. "It was like—like something started to spin in my brain. I—I guess it was stage fright. Sorry. Won't do it again."

"Of course not." Ledoux was smiling. "That was part of the act. You see," Ledoux raised his voice for the benefit of the audience, "you fell because I willed that you should fall. I purposely made you topple backwards because it is almost impossible for a man to fall in such a way. I could have made you fall in any direction. Once more, Captain, my thanks."

Ruddy-faced McGrath walked off the stage, trying to grin at the applause. Ledoux then clapped his hands and six young men appeared on the stage.

Gasps of astonishment came from the audience for most of them knew these young men. They were from excellent families. They lined up, smiled good naturedly and one of them even waved to a friend in the audience.

Ledoux ignored them. He walked to the footlight.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "You have witnessed an exhibition of my power upon a police captain who certainly could not have been in my pay. Now these six young men and I have been close for many weeks. They have studied under me to gain for themselves cleaner bodies, minds and souls. My teachings consist of intense discipline. These young men have attuned their minds to mine. I can will that they do almost anything within reason. What you will now see is an exhibition of my powers."

He moved to the end of the stage, lighted a cigarette and while applying flame to it, the action began. With no sign from him, all six men stiffened. Like zombies, they walked to the back of the stage, turned and rushed at the spectators as if to plunge straight over the footlights. Within inches of this, they all stopped simultaneously and remained frozen in whatever positions they were, when Ledoux's silent order commanded them to stop.

Ledoux walked over so the nearest man and pushed him gently. He felt over like a stick of wood. As he hit the stage, his position did not change. Arms, legs and body remained frozen.

Ledoux smiled, bowed and the six men were themselves again. Three of them walked out of sight behind the wings. The remaining three received their mental commands, stiffened and then marched beneath the trapezes, hoisted themselves up grotesquely and began swinging.

For five minutes they performed astounding feats. No highly skilled aerialists could have done better and taken more chances. Every few seconds if seemed as though they'd fall and break their necks.

Finally the man on the trapeze to the left began swinging furiously. As he came out above the spectators—for the trapeze was very long—they could see his eyes were glazed. On his features was an impassive smile.

He kept swinging higher and further out over the heads of the watchers. Ledoux was once more leaning against the edge of the proscenium arch, apparently oblivious to what was taking place.

Suddenly the man on the trapeze let go. He went sailing high into the sir, somersaulted and came down toward the crowded seats.

Women screamed and men hastily ducked. The young man landed squarely in the center of the aisle, rolled over twice and arose. One leg was raised, one arm high in the air and stood that way until Ledoux gave a nod. The young men relaxed, looked around and seemed amazed to find himself among the spectators.

He spoke, his tone cultured.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have not the vaguest idea of how I got here. At the commands of Mr. Ledoux, my mind ceased to be my own. It became his. I am unaware of what I did, but if it interested you, I am glad. Thank you."

HE WALKED back to Ledoux, who helped him up the steps. Ledoux went to the center of the stage.

"You have seen that mental power can be accomplished. This is done for healthful reasons. Those who place themselves in my care will find I have removed all habits, good and bad. My treatment is severe. It embodies hard physical work, fasting, mind discipline until the physical being is obedient to the will. Those who successfully pursue my instructions will find their wills equal to mine. They will know clairvoyancy, mind reading, telepathic capacity. Frankly, I need your kind assistance in a financial and a personal way. Any who are interested may request an interview. But I shall accept only those whom I am sure will respond to my treatment."

At the back of the hall, Captain McGrath rubbed his chin.

"I think he's busting a lot of laws, Mr. Corday."

"He is breaking none," Corday said impatiently. "He tells no fortunes, dabbles in no black sorcery. He is a scientist. I'd give my right arm for his ability."

McGrath had a crooked grin on his face. "I think I know why, too. Tomorrow you face that attorney,

Follow the Black Bat as he battles to smash

Tony Quinn, in court and he's a pretty shrewd article. Used to be D.A. himself and knows all the tricks. Makes me glad I only made the pinch in the case."

"That's enough," Corday snapped. "Quinn is just another attorney defending a crook. I never try cases unless I am certain of a conviction. Keep your opinions to yourself, Captain. We'll leave now."

"As you wish," McGrath sighed. "We came here to see if this Jules Ledoux has the power to make a guy do something he wouldn't ordinarily do. He can. My back is still sore from that fall. Well—what's the verdict? Barlow was a student of Ledoux. Do you believe Ledoux made him perform that robbery?"

"If he did," Corday said thoughtfully, "we still have nothing on Ledoux. Not one thing. He is no charlatan, Captain. He can control the will of another person. We saw that, but just how far he could go is still a mystery."

"Then I don't make the pinch?" McGrath asked disgustedly.

"Did I mention an arrest? You may go back to headquarters. Some of my friends are in the audience and I want to see them. You're not needed further. Good night, Captain."

McGrath popped a black cigar into his mouth, and stalked away, madder than when the Black Bat pulled one of his tricks. At least the Black Bat was a gentleman, not a stuffed shirt. McGrath wasn't going to like District Attorney Corday. He would go into court in the morning, hoping Corday's opponent would win, even though cherishing no deep-seated affection for the defense lawyer, Tony Quinn.

CHAPTER II
Accepted Challenge

CRIMINAL COURT wasn't jammed the following morning. The cases for presentation were not of especial importance. Captain McGrath was lounging in one of the hard chairs. He hated to appear in court. District Attorney Corday finished a case by seeking a ten-year sentence for a criminal. The sentence was for five years and Corday felt smugly satisfied. He made it a practice to ask for twice as much as he really wanted to get.

The clerk called the next and last case. It was that of the State vs. Byron Nash. Corday looked around the courtroom with a sour expression.

"The State is ready, your honor, if the attorney for the defense and the defendant ever arrive."

The swinging doors of the courtroom opened and two men came through. One was tall, ruggedly handsome and carried himself well. But his eyes were fixed and staring while his steps betrayed the halting, careful tread of a blind man. He leaned on the arm of a shorter man, who was bald-headed, slender, middle-aged and answered to the name of "Silk" Kirby.

Of course Kirby hadn't been baptized with an odd name like "Silk," but it really belonged with him. He'd earned it in his younger days when he had been a slick, smooth confidence man. Though he had changed his ways, Silk was still smooth.

The blind man was Tony Quinn, once D.A. himself. It was in the course of handling his duties as district attorney that he'd been blinded. Certain desperate crooks in a mad effort to destroy evidence, had hurled acid into Tony Quinn's face and instantly blinded him.

Behind these two came the defendant, a seventeen-year-old, badly frightened youngster. Quinn and the defendant took seats at the lawyer's table. Silk Kirby started to sit down close to Captain McGrath, suddenly realized what he was doing and, with a scowl, moved several seats away.

Corday got busy at once. The defendant was charged with stealing a twelve-dollar piece of costume jewelry. Quinn pleaded not guilty in behalf of his client and leaned back while Corday presented the case.

Ordinarily, the District Attorney would never have handled a case of such minor importance, but Corday had never liked Quinn. They'd often battled in court, with Quinn usually winning. This time Corday thought Quinn would lose. The thing was a set-up.

A policeman got on the stand, testified to making the arrest, identified a gaudy little necklace, which he said the defendant had stolen. The owner of the jewelry store also identified the necklace. Quinn made no attempt to question the witnesses. But when Corday finished with the jewelry store owner, the blind attorney arose and extended one hand gropingly in Corday's direction.

"May I handle the necklace?" he asked. "I see things by touch." Corday handed it over. Quinn ran the flimsy thing between his fingers, sighed and placed the necklace on the table.

"Does the State rest?" he asked blandly.

Corday, although intent on looking for tricks, fell into Quinn's trap. He waved a hand.

a vicious crime ring of evil dealers in death!

"There is no necessity for further testimony. The case is clear cut. Witnesses identified this necklace, even saw it being stolen. Of course the State rests."

Quinn smiled. "Thank you. Mr. Corday. You claim a necklace was stolen by my client. What necklace?"

Corday turned slightly purple and scooped up the piece of junk jewelry.

"This one, of course," he roared.

Quinn's voice grew even milder. "But, Mr. Corday, as I recall it, no necklace was entered in evidence. It was identified, but I'm sure the court clerk neither marked it as an exhibit nor took down one word to the effect that it had been entered in evidence and—the State rested. Remember? Without evidence, how can you convict?"

Corday let out a roar. "Your honor, this is charlatanry in its lowest form. My opponent is a shyster. He tries to take advantage of a small technical omission. This is outrageous!"

The judge cleared his throat and suppressed a grin.

"It seems to me that the defense is perfectly within its rights," he said. "Nothing was actually introduced as evidence and this court operates according to the law. The case is dismissed."

QUINN arose quickly.

"Your honor," he said and his eyes were turned somewhat to the left of the bench. "I confess that I took advantage of my opponent's carelessness. As a usual practice, I would do no such thing, but in this particular case, I think I will not be held to blame. The defendant is seventeen years old. In four days he is to report for induction into the armed forces. A criminal record—even a suspended sentence—would harm him. His crime was minor. Restitution has been made in full. The defendant is poor. And he is in love. A young man in love and on the verge of going to war can easily lose his sense of judgment."

Corday jumped to his feet, but the judge waved him into the chair again and Quinn went on, apparently oblivious of the interruption.

"The defendant, your honor, had no money. Not a dime. He wanted to give his girl a farewell present. Who can blame him? He went into this jewelry store merely to look, without any hopes of buying. The counters were strewn with this—ah—junk jewelry. Thereupon, the defendant slipped, for the first time in his life. In fact, he was so clumsy that he was detected in the act. However, an appraisal of his loot has revealed that the twelve-dollar item is worth about one dollar and thirty cents. Thank you, your honor."

"Case dismissed," the judge roared again and wheeled away from the bench.

Quinn sat back, called his client by name and for five minutes gave him a lecture.

"You might have been sent to jail for thirty to sixty days. It would have ruined your army record before that, record even began. The wages of theft is jail. In this case we were just lucky. It so happened that the district attorney doesn't like me, and became just a mite too eager to get his conviction. I retorted to a shyster trick for the first time in my life. Now beat it. Duck the enemy bullets and come back with a blaze of medals on your tunic. There is no fee—not for a United States military man. Good luck."

The defendant gulped, shook hands with Quinn and hurried out. Corday came over and sat down beside the defense attorney. There was a strange smirk on his face, which he was sure Quinn could not detect. It is easy to let emotions become visible because a blind man cannot see them.

"I heard what you told that little punk," Corday said. "All right. I was fairly beaten. You're a smart fellow, Quinn. It's too bad you had to quit being the District Attorney."

"Yes," Quinn replied, "isn't it? What's on your alleged mind, Corday?"

The D.A, flushed, but retained his temper. "Nothing much, Quinn. I was just thinking a man as clever as you might accept a dare. For instance, I am about to try a case very similar to the one you just won. A likeable young man of a good family. His first offense and it happens to be the theft of a necklace. Not a piece of junk, but an item worth exactly fifteen thousand dollars—wholesale. Are you shrewd enough to take this case as prosecutor, use your famous skill, and convict the accused of the crime? Sort of handling a similar case on the other side of the fence."

"What are you driving at, Corday?" Quinn demanded,

Corday smiled. "Just this. I dare you to take this case. I'll bet you haven't the nerve to do it."

Quinn shrugged. "Why not? Of course, this is all talk. I can't prosecute anyone."

"You can if I appoint you assistant district attorney," Corday said. "I have a vacancy and I could use a man of your talents. Are you afraid?"

"I'm not," Quinn snapped. "I don't like taking cases I know so little about, but the idea of becoming an assistant D.A. is intriguing. Very much so. This case can't be airtight, of course?"

"As airtight as the one you just handled," Corday assured him. "The accused was practically seen stealing the jewelry. It was found in his possession. He has the weakest possible defense. The case is ready for trial and scheduled to begin in a half hour. You accept my challenge."

Quinn arose and raised his right hand.

"Swear me in, Corday," he said. "I sense a trick of some kind and all bets are off if you haven't told me the truth."

CORDAY hastily administered the oath of office and as Quinn sat down, Corday burst into a gale of laughter.

"All I wanted to do, Quinn, was to see you make a fool of yourself. See you do work distasteful to your easy going nature. You are always for the underdog, but now you are committed to the policy of sending the accused to prison,"

"If he deserves it, I'll do my best to put him there," Quinn said. "Now what did you neglect to tell me, Corday?"

The district attorney laughed. "Just minor items. The accused comes of an important and influential family. There is money behind him and a battery of lawyers to make your hair stand on end. Captain McGrath made the arrest on complaint of a jeweler. However, this jeweler has had a change of heart. He won't be the best witness in the world."

Quinn leaned back in his chair, "You mean the case is weak. It looks good on the surface, but won't hold together because of an unwillingness of witnesses to testify. Well, I'll keep my end of the bargain. Give me the low-down."

"McGrath can do that," Corday replied. "I wash my hands of the matter. McGrath, come here and tell my new assistant all about the Barlow case. He's going to handle it."

Corday walked out of the courtroom. McGrath whistled in surprise and sat down beside Quinn.

"It's me," he said. "McGrath. Say—it looks as if Corday hung a beaut on you."

"Tell me the worst," Quinn groaned. "Corday has gone out to notify the press of my appointment. He'll play it up to the skies and I'll probably lose. Then he'll gloat and laugh."

"He's a rat," McGrath confided. "Nobody likes him. Now, I don't exactly trust you. It's my idea you're not blind. I think you're the Black Bat. Just the same, I feel sorry for you."

"Get on with it, Captain."

"Well, this kid, Charlie Barlow, walked into a big jewelry store and asked to see some stuff. Two strangers were in the store, standing beside him. After they left, a necklace was missing. I went down because everybody else was busy. I searched this Barlow kid and the necklace was in his pocket."

"Evidence enough," Quinn commented. "There must be something else."

McGrath shrugged. "The kid claims he never lifted it—says one of those strangers must have slipped him the necklace, planning to pick his pocket later, when he came out of the store. That's been done before, you know. Now it looks as if maybe the kid would get the benefit of the doubt. You know, family, money, influence."

"Besides an army of fast lawyers, unwilling witnesses, an insurance company that doesn't want to prosecute. Yes, I understand, Captain. I've been neatly framed."

"You said it," McGrath grumbled. "Corday will build you up. You're bound to lose the case and then—will Corday laugh! Here he comes now with a lot of reporters."

Flash bulbs flared. Quinn's eyes never moved. To all appearances he was completely blind, impervious to the blinding lights. A gavel rapped. The case was ready.

Quinn arose. "Your honor, the State is not ready, I ask for a continuance."

"I object!" One of the defense attorneys leaped to his feet. "We've been ready for days. Corday told us the case would be tried. What is this?"

"I was appointed assistant district attorney five minutes ego," Quinn explained. "I know little about the case and what I do know indicates the case is not strong enough for presentation at the moment. I ask one week's postponement."

THE defense attorneys argued against it while Corday tittered in high glee. By confessing he couldn't go on, Quinn had betrayed weakness.

The judge frowned. "I don't quite comprehend this. I was also told the case was prepared. However, Mr. Quinn's reputation is such that when he claims unpreparedness, we must believe him. I do recall though, when Mr. Quinn was the district attorney, he never asked for continuances for any reason. The case is continued one week—no longer."

Reporters shook hands with Quinn and congratulated him, welcomed him back as a D.A. They were sincere about it, too, but Quinn knew that unless he obtained more evidence, a conviction was impossible. The case should never have been brought into court, but he was stuck with it. Asking for a dismissal now would be heart-breaking. His first case as a new D.A., a complete flop. Quinn's fingers clasped into tight, hard fists.

"Captain McGrath," he said, "will you be good enough to assemble all the evidence on hand and bring it to my home this evening?"

"I'll be there," McGrath announced. He bent close and whispered in Quinn's ear. "Say, this is something the Black Bat couldn't crack. Or could he? I'll be watching to see if he gets interested in the case."

Corday's laughter became audible as Quinn shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER III
Set-Up for Crime

TONY QUINN'S home was in one of the best sections of the city. It was a large house, set well back on a rather spacious estate. Well-cared-for trees and shrubbery formed an effective screen. Beside the house ran a short one-way street, just the length of Quinn's estate, and there were no houses on the opposite side.

Financially, Tony Quinn was more than comfortable. His staff of servants consisted only of Silk Kirby, whom he trusted implicitly. As district attorney, Quinn had built up a great reputation—until the moment when he was blinded. He'd gone into seclusion then, feeling as sorry for himself as the others who sympathized with him. Slowly, however, he'd become reconciled and set about making the best of things.

As in the case of most blind people, the other senses developed to an amazing degree. His touch, sense of smell and taste, his hearing became extremely acute. When he approached a wall or a pole or even a shrub, he seemed mysteriously to know it. It worked something like radar rays which echo when they strike something substantial.

Endowed with these added faculties, Quinn determined to recover his eyesight if possible. A long campaign began. He visited doctors all over the world. It was before the war began. These specialists gave him no comfort, no hope.

He was gripped by despair, especially one night when a girl came to see him. Carol Baldwin brought him a strange proposition. Her father, a police officer, was dying of a bullet wound inflicted by a cowardly killer. He had only a short time to live. He'd heard of Tony Quinn and knew that law and order had lost a valuable ally when Quinn was removed from it.

So Carol Baldwin's father offered Quinn his eyes. The eyes of a man who knew he was dying and they'd be of small loss to him during the few weeks he had left. Quinn had accepted, gone to a small midwestern town where an unknown surgeon performed a delicate surgical operation.

Carol Baldwin's father died soon after. Tony Quinn returned home and waited for the incisions to heal. When he removed the bandage, finally, he discovered that nature had recompensed him for his many months of blindness. Not only could he see perfectly but—he could see in the blackest darkness. To him, even pastel shades were visible in a Jet black room.

Then, Silk Kirby had slipped into Quinn's house. At the time Silk was desperate. Instead of robbing Quinn, Kirby saved Quinn's life and became his trusted aide. Carol Baldwin also joined the tiny band and, finally, a hulk of a man named Jack O'Leary, but who responded to the name of "Butch." Butch was a veritable giant with hands the size of boxing gloves, a bull neck, big head and bulging muscles. He was a little slow in mental gymnastics, but when it came to physical prowess there were few who could best him.

And so these three people and Tony Quinn, became associated with one purpose in mind. To fight crime and criminals, Quinn donned a black hood that covered his face. This was important for the acid thrown into his eyes had splattered alongside them and inflicted permanent deep scars. These would have been a dead give-away unless he covered them.

Working on cases, he wore nothing but black clothing and he'd borrowed his pseudonym from the mammal with wings that flies by night. He became the Black Bat and it wasn't long before the underworld heard of him in no uncertain terms.

He became a crack shot with many weapons. He knew how to fight in almost any method. He studied criminology and the science of it. A secret door from his study led into a large, well appointed laboratory where he kept all the latest devices used to solve crime.

From this secret lab a tunnel led to a garden house, well behind the big residence, and thence to the quiet, deserted side street. That route formed a perfect avenue for Butch O'Leary and Carol Baldwin to visit the house, and for the Black Bat to slip in and out as he wished.

Through all of this, Tony Quinn retained his pose of a blind man. It wasn't difficult for he'd had plenty of practice when really blind. Everyone knew how much he had tried to regain his sight and how unsuccessful he'd been, so few doubted his blindness. Only two people, in fact, doubted it, and neither was sure.

Captain McGrath was the most dangerous of these. He'd sworn to expose the Black Bat if it took him the rest of his life. Although McGrath realized the Black Bat was on the side of the law, the tough little detective captain believed that anyone who broke the law deserved to be punished. The Black Bat, in his maneuvers, rarely stopped to consider consequences, when in pursuit of a criminal or shooting it out with one. He threw laws to the winds and battled in his own way. Therefore, McGrath was more dangerous than a nuisance.

THE other doubter was Police Commissioner Warner, a tall, very erect man who was one of the best commissioners the city had ever known. Warner never seriously considered whether or not

Quinn was the Black Bat. In fact, he secretly hoped so, for it meant that Quinn wasn't blind and Warner would have been happy about that.

Tony Quinn sat in a well worn, comfortable chair in his study. He wore a smoking jacket and puffed contentedly on a pipe. Silk bustled about while he talked. If any prying eyes peered through windows, they'd seen only a blind man at ease and his busy servant.

"Sorry to say it, sir," Silk sighed, "but you stepped into Corday's trap as easily as he fell into yours."

"Yes, I know, Silk. I really slipped up. Yet, I've a feeling there is more behind the case than Corday lets on. McGrath is coming here tonight. Better make sure Gwendolyn is locked up. She doesn't appreciate McGrath."

At the mention of the name Gwendolyn, a huge dog raised its head, wagged a tail and one end table went crashing to the floor. Silk heaved a sigh and called to the dog. It rose and ambled toward Quinn. He petted her and then gave her orders. The dog trotted—like a herd of elephants—behind Silk, who took her upstairs.

When Silk returned, he was chuckling. "When McGrath gave you that mutt to act as a Seeing Eye, he figured she'd give you away. He thought she'd trail you when you put on the regalia of the Black Bat."

Quinn laughed. "So he did, but Gwendolyn is a good dog. Something like Butch and just as faithful. McGrath is coming now."

Silk Kirby had heard nothing, but he knew better than to doubt Quinn's acute hearing. When Kirby reached the door, McGrath was climbing the porch steps. Silk didn't like him and took few pains to hide the fact. McGrath marched into the study and sat down.

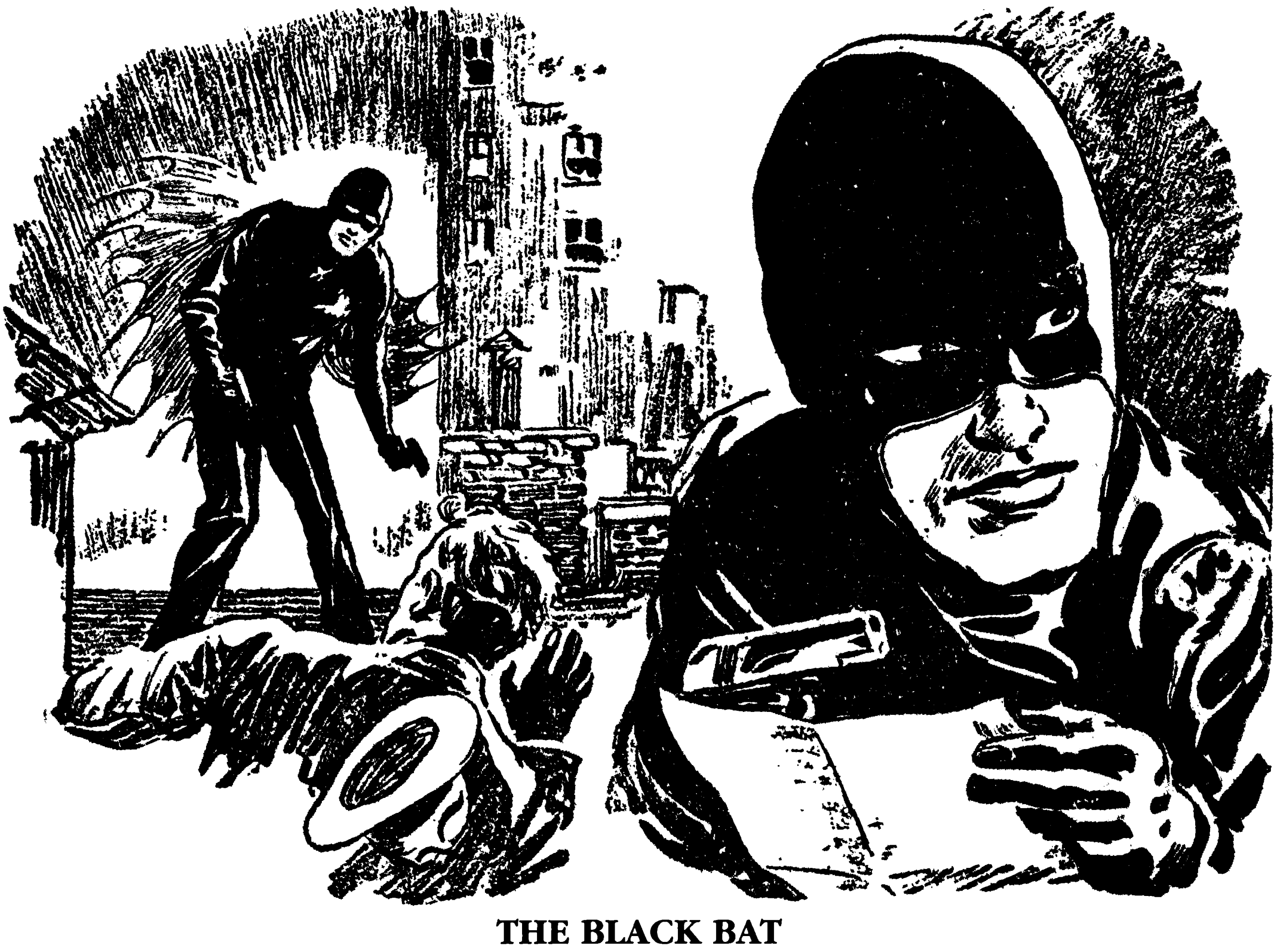
"Let's forget our differences, Quinn," he said, "Corday pulled a fast one. Personally I'm glad you're back as a D.A. You're good. You'll uphold the law as the assistant D,A, but bust it all to smithereens as the Black Bat."

"Thank you, Captain," Quinn smiled. "You have a suspicious nature."

McGrath rolled his unlighted cigar between his teeth. "You'll stop kidding when I tell you the facts. This Barlow kid didn't remember those two strangers by his side at the time of the theft. The jeweler's clerk recalled that. I made the pinch quick and young Barlow acted like a zombie. Like he was sleepwalking. When he snapped out of it—and get this—he never remembered being in the jewelry store and he hadn't the vaguest notion why he was pinched."

"So?" Quinn prompted.

"Well, it was Corday's idea. I'll say that much



THE BLACK BAT

for him. He figured maybe young Barlow was hypnotized."

"Now wait." Quinn held up one hand. "Before you go any further, hypnotism has certain limits. Persons can be hypnotized, yes. It has been done many, many times. Any psychiatrist can hypnotize you, but he cannot make you do things against your own nature."

"I know all about that," McGrath said impatiently, "Let me finish, will you? Corday heard about a guy named Jules Ledoux, who runs some kind of a school to teach people how to purify themselves. Cult business, maybe. Anyway, young Barlow had been a pupil of Ledoux's and Corday wondered if Ledoux had mentally compelled Barlow to perform this shoplifting job."

"Did he?" Quinn asked.

McGrath shrugged. "You got me. Corday and I went to Ledoux's theatre demonstration last night, and that man certainly has something. I don't know what it is, but he made me walk across the stage. He fell into step behind me and all of a sudden he threw himself backwards. At that instant I fell backwards too, and I didn't slip, I didn't lose my balance and I haven't the slightest idea of what made me drop."

Quinn suddenly grew serious. "Captain, this goes deeper than I thought. What else happened?"

"Well, Ledoux had six young guys on the stage, kids like Barlow. They'd been living at Ledoux's place upstate, studying under him. He put them through the darnedest paces you ever saw. He never gave an order or looked at them. Claimed he did it all by the power of his will."

RUBBING his chin, Quinn frowned thoughtfully.

"And so he did," he mused. "Man can acquire such power by diligent study and concentration. There have been several. Gurdjieff, Crowley and others. They attained mental powers and proved it. This Ledoux must be of the same caliber. The others were honest men, but if someone so endowed turned to crime, it would cause serious trouble. This bears looking into, Captain."

"You'll do it, eh?' McGrath said quickly. "You can start right away?"

"Hold on," Quinn chuckled. "You still suspect me of being the Black Bat. McGrath, do you really believe I can see?"

McGrath blinked several times and looked straight into those lifeless eyes.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Sometimes I'm sure you're the Black Bat. If so, you're not blind, and how could that be? Remember, if you are the Black Bat, I'll land you one of these days. You won't fall easy."

"Bosh," Quinn said. "Captain, I want you to go to work on this at once. Find out everything about Ledoux. Where he comes from, who he is. Check his finances, his friends—everything. Report to me when you have the information."

"Yes, sir," McGrath arose. "I'll do my best. See you sometime tomorrow. I hope Corday doesn't get away with this. Honest, I'd be willing to call a truce with the Black Bat to pin Corday's ears back. Corday gives me a pain."

CHAPTER IV

The Dervish Dangler

SHORTLY after McGrath departed, Silk Kirby moved around the study, drawing shades and pulling draperies over the windows. When it was impossible for anyone to see into the room, Tony Quinn arose, thrust his cane under one arm and his eyes changed abruptly. They lost that dead, staring look and became alive and alert. Walking briskly to the book-lined wall, he touched a spring and a door slid open. He stepped into his hidden laboratory.

A decidedly pretty girl, blond, blue-eyed and trimly dressed, hurried toward him with both hands extended. "Tony, there is something big doing. I could tell by your voice when you phoned me."

"Yeah." Butch O'Leary came forward too, walking carefully so he wouldn't bump against the lab benches and upset things. Butch reminded one of the huge dog, Gwendolyn, just as carefree, just as strong and deadly.

"I hope it's something good," Butch rumbled. "I ain't had me a sizeable scrap in a long time."

Quinn sat down on a leather davenport with Carol. "This may turn into something big or it may flop completely. Here is the dope in a nutshell. A mystic named Jules Ledoux claims he can control the wills of others and demonstrates the fact. No set-up, mind you. Captain McGrath was one of his victims. Ledoux proved his will superior to McGrath's."

"That's not so much," Butch grunted. He didn't like McGrath.

Quinn grinned, "Furthermore, one of Ledoux's pupils is mixed up in a jewelry store shoplifting act. A fifteen thousand dollar necklace. This lad claims he doesn't even remember being in the jewelry store."

"Tony, if this young man was under Ledoux's domination, we're up against a white witch," said Carol.

"White witch?" Quinn frowned.

"Yes, I know a lot about them. Black witches are those who do nothing but evil. White witches use their talents for the good of mankind. There are

modem day witches. Nowadays they call them mystics and fanatics, but they do possess unearthly powers. It's no fake. Dad made a study of them before he—died."

"Hm," Quinn said, "I guess I'll have to make a study of them, too. You see, if this man Ledoux can control the will of others and not through plain hypnotism, he might turn into one of the biggest crooks we've ever encountered. He'd be a dangerous man to fight also and that's why we're going to get started early,"

Butch O'Leary wrinkled his nose, "It sounds like the bunk to me. Show me this white witch and I'll turn him inside out and see what color he has underneath."

"My calling them white or black witches has no bearing on the color of their skin, only upon the type of witchcraft they perform," said Carol. "Tony, how can we find out all about this man?"

Quinn stared at the floor for a moment. "Suppose you lease an expensive apartment for a short time. Give the impression that you are exceedingly wealthy. Butch can pose as your chauffeur."

Carol nodded. "I see. Ledoux wants wealthy people to join his cult. By becoming his pupil, I can get the inside story. Splendid, Tony! I'll start now."

Quinn looked over at Butch. "Your job is to see that Carol comes to no harm. You may find yourself up against something you can't fight with fists. Lay off the rough stuff until I give you the word. Keep in touch with me constantly."

"Right." Butch showed eagerness. "I'll only start smearing guys when Carol is in danger."

"Good," Quinn arose and opened a steel locker. He took out a black suit, black shirt and tie. Also a jet black hood which fitted over his head closely and identified him, without question, as the Black Bat. A pair of heavy automatics, some skeleton keys and a kit of tools were lined up on the bench. The Black Bat was ready to start work.

"Incidentally," he told Carol and Butch, "I was appointed an assistant district attorney today. Surprised?"

"Astounded," Carol gasped, "But won't it be dangerous, working as a D.A. and the Black Bat at the same time?"

"It shouldn't be." Quinn smiled, "I can get a lot of information through the D.A.'s office which will help me to solve our case. No, it may be good for us and, confidentially, it's good to be back in the saddle."

Carol Baldwin was ready to descend into the tunnel. She hesitated.

"The present D.A.'s term expires pretty soon. You could get the job, Tony. The people of this city would elect you again. The city needs a D.A. like you."

IT WAS a suggestion which had been made by her several times before.

"We'll see," Quinn replied. "After all, I'm supposed to be blind and a D.A. must be able to see. Good luck. Keep in touch with Silk and me."

Shortly after they departed, Tony Quinn was garbed as the Black Bat, moving silently on rubber-soled shoes through the tunnel. Dressed entirely in black, he was hardly more than a blur in the darkness and yet he could see as well as if a spotlight illuminated his path.

He reached the garden house, made certain the way was clear and sprinted across the estate, out the gate and toward a cheap coupé that was parked on the dead end street. Jumping in, he pulled a wide-brimmed hat far down over his head and made certain the hood was in his pocket.

Wearing the hood while proceeding through town was dangerous. The wide-brimmed hat protected the upper part of his features from the curious stares and shaded the telltale scars around his eyes. He stopped near Charles Barlow's residence. Things seemed to have begun with young Barlow, so she case might as well start there, too.

The Black Bat used no orthodox method of entering the house. In the back yard, he adjusted his hood and put the wide-brimmed hat away. He reached a window that was open a half inch, raised it high and listened. Abnormally acute hearing, developed during his many months of blindness, told him nobody was stirring within.

It was too early for the occupants to be in bed so they must all be away. That was perfect. Quinn climbed silently through the window and needed no flashlight to cross the strange room. His eyes penetrated the darkness readily.

There was a desk in one corner and desks usually contained items of interest. He sat down behind it, opened drawers and studied papers and check books. He discovered the Barlow family wasn't as well off as they pretended,

Barlow Senior had suffered because of the war. His bank balances were shaky, his business on the rocks and it had been for almost two years now. There was, however, nothing pertaining to Charles Barlow Jr., except some old check stubs indicating the fat allowances the young man had been in the habit of getting had stopped recently.

Suddenly the Black Bat sat erect and his head cocked to one side a trifle. Faintly—so faintly ordinary ears would never have detected the sound—came a strange, squeaking noise. It originated from the front of the house.

The Black Bat drew a gun, crept out of the room and along a corridor. The noise drew him like a magnet until he stood before a closed door. He

placed fingers firmly on the knob, turned it gently and threw the door wide. He gave a start of surprise and horror.

In the middle of the room, affixed to the ceiling, was a large hook. Attached to this was a velvet cord ending in a loop, much like a passenger's strap in a bus or a subway. Through this loop was a man's wrist. The man himself was turning slowly, his feet about two inches from the floor. When the twisted rope ceased spinning in one direction, the body of the man stopped momentarily and then began turning in the opposite direction.

Furthermore, the man who hung by one wrist was blindfolded tightly and—he was dead. Through the darkness, the Black Bat could see that his throat had been slit by a savage slash. His rotating body had spilled blood all over the rug and the nearby furniture.

The Black Bat hurried over beside the corpse and stopped it from spinning any further. The flesh was slightly warm, indicating that death had taken place within the hour, perhaps. On the floor, just below the dead man's dangling feet, was an old fashioned razor, opened and stained with blood. The man's right hand was blood-stained too, as if the blood had rushed from the wound before he dropped the razor.

A further examination showed the fingers of the right hand to be deeply stained by tobacco tar. This was proof the dead man had been right-handed. Quinn gently raised the head and studied the incision. It had been started from the right side of the throat, to the left. He stepped back, frowning. A right-handed man would most certainly have started to slit his own throat from the left. It was much easier and more efficient for a man seeking self-inflicted death.

The victim was young and looked like Charles Barlow. The Black Bat didn't remove the blindfold yet. It covered the forehead and reached almost down below the nose. Instead, the Black Bat searched the young man's pockets and found they'd apparently been stripped. Not even a pack of matches remained.

AS HIS sensitive fingers slid to the inside pocket of the coat, they rubbed lightly against the dead man's shirt and the Black Bat felt something concealed beneath it. He unbuttoned the shirt and took out a glossy photograph.

In the darkness his abnormal eyes scanned the picture. It showed a doll, dressed exactly the same as the dead man. There was a crimson cord twisted around the doll's throat. The Black Bat tucked this picture into his own pocket and started to remove the blindfold. He wanted so be sure this was young Charles Barlow.

Someone ran up on the front porch. A key was thrust into the front door lock. The Black Bat quietly faded into one of the darkest corners of the room and drew himself behind thick draperies.

Whoever had entered seemed to know the place. He hurried upstairs and then came down again. After a

Near the Black Bat hung a man, suspended by one wrist.

couple of minutes the door of this room opened and the intruder switched on the lights. The Black Bat suppressed a startled gasp for he had about made up his mind that the dead man was Charles Barlow. Now young Barlow stood just inside the doorway, his face registering intense horror.

Barlow slowly backed out of the room. He was undoubtedly going to call for help. The Black Bat decided to talk to him while he was still too terrified to conceal the truth.

"Stay where you are," the Black Bat called out.

He came from behind the draperies, an ominous figure in black and holding a gun in one hand. Barlow's two arms shot ceiling-ward and he trembled badly. The Black Bat ordered him to lower his arms and, taking one, he led Barlow into another room.

"Sit down," he said. "I'm the Black Bat. Why I happen to be in your house is not your concern. I want some information."

"B-but that's R-Ronnie. It's Ronnie and he's dead. I know he's dead."

"He certainly is," the Black Bat commented dryly. "Tell me why, how and by whose hand. Do you know?"

"He killed himself. Sure, that's it. That's Dad's razor on the floor. Ronnie must have got it and slit his throat. You—you don't think I—I did it?"

"I'm not sure, Barlow. You did steal a valuable necklace from a jewelry store. What about that?"

"I didn't, I swear I didn't. Why should I steal? Dad has plenty of money. I don't know why I entered that jewelry shop. I didn't want anything there."

"All right," the Black Bat said. "Now what about this dead man? Who is he? Why is he in your house?"

"His name is Ronnie Raynor and that's all I'll say." Barlow grew belligerent. "You ask me what he's doing here. What are you doing here?"

"Investigating a murder," the Black Bat replied. "Ronnie Raynor did not commit suicide and it would be much better if you talked to me. For practice, if nothing else, because the police won't be gentle about this thing."

"He came here to use my dervish dangler," Barlow said sullenly.

The Black Bat sat down, keeping his gun trained on the young man.

"Dervish dangling, eh?" he said. "You suspend yourself by one wrist, allow the body to rotate and you cast out thoughts of any kind from your mind. After a while, the steady turning has its effect. Your consciousness leaves your body and goes forth for adventure. Am I right, Barlow?"

"The way you say it shows you don't believe." Barlow showed some real spirit for the first time. "You're like everyone else. But it does work. I've tried it. Ronnie could see into the future. I never got that far. I only went into the past."

The Black Bat took the picture of the doll from his pocket and tossed it onto a table.

"Take a look, Barlow," he said, "and tell me what that means."

Barlow picked up the photograph, slanted it toward the table lamp which alone illuminated the room. His face became deathly pale. His lips moved and he tried to answer. Instead, his knees gave way and he collapsed onto the floor.

A moment later the Black Bat heard a car pull into the driveway. He stepped to the telephone and called Police Headquarters.

He asked for Captain McGrath.

"This is an old friend of yours, Captain. There's a murdered man in the Barlow residence. Remember—murdered, not suicide. Think of me in your dreams. This is the Black Bat. Good night, Captain."

CHAPTER V

Mystic's House

AS SOMEONE came in through the rear, the Black Bat slipped out the front door. A woman's scream cut the silence as he sped through a dark yard to his car. Either the senseless body of young Barlow or the dead man had been discovered.

The Black Bat grimaced. The dervish dangling device was a satanic device, little known in America. But in Arabia and India fakirs practiced with it devoutly. Here, among modern, intelligent people, it seemed bizarre.

Behind the practice lay the idea of physical fatigue and mental paralysis inducing the inner self to depart from the body. It was unbelievable, fantastic, but there were believers who maintained they did then see into the past or the future.

In the former classification, the Black Bat reasoned that the believers merely dreamed about the past, from history books they'd read and developed into a nightmare. Those who claimed to see into the future, he put down as plain liars.

But, in the back of the Black Bat's mind, remained an element of doubt. Could such things be true? As true as the whirling dervishes of foreign lands claimed they were? The Black Bat hoped he'd find out.

He drove the coupé out of town and along a highway barren of cars because troops abroad needed gasoline more than civilians. He knew where Jules Ledoux maintained his baronial estate, with its castle, on a hill.

Reaching it, he parked the car where it was well hidden and moved on up the hill toward a high steel fence. He wasn't sure whether or not the fence was electrified so he tested it by tossing over a long, thin steel chain which he carried in his pockets. There was no tell-tale flash. He retrieved the chain and went over the fence easily.

Fifty feet from the mansion, he crouched down in the darkness to study the place. It must have contained fifty or sixty rooms and it sprawled over a huge tract of land. There were porches and patios. Shaded walks, a large produce garden and fruit trees, even a good-sized swimming pool. Ledoux's believers certainly lived a pleasant life and, without much doubt, paid for it very well indeed.

The Black Bat moved closer, trying to select some good means of entering the house without being detected. He wanted to look the place over unmolested, study the house and its occupants.

Suddenly the front door opened, a light winked on and a rotund little man stepped onto the porch. He looked around, apparently trying so locate someone.

"Black Bat," he called out. "Black Bat! Where are you?"

The Black Bat gasped. This was unbelievable. Except himself, no one had known he had been coming here. His decision had been almost a spur-of-the-moment thing after he found Ronnie Raynor murdered. Yet here was some member of the household calling his name.

The Black Bat walked rapidly toward the porch, with no further attempt at concealment. The round little man on the porch was somewhat taken back by the eerie man who stepped into the light and advanced toward him. He retained his composure with an effort.

"Welcome, Black Bat," he said. "Mr. Ledoux has been in mental contact with you. You must have been thinking very hard about him. Won't you step in? We have nothing to hide here."

"Who are you?" the Black Bat demanded.

"My name is David Hoffman. I am Mr. Ledoux's manager. He will see you in a few moments. Meanwhile, come in and make yourself comfortable. Feel free to ask me any question, at all. If you don't mind, I shall ask some, too. Especially your reason for investigating us."

The Black Bat studied the little man intently and felt that if this whole fantastic set-up was as crooked as a Nazi promise, Hoffman had nothing to do with it. His round, ruddy cheeks, mild, frank eyes and ready smile were not those of a man with murder in his mind.

The Black Bat entered a vast, quiet reception hall.

"Please don't talk loudly," Hoffman begged him. "You see, the residents—disciples, if you wish—are all asleep. They retire early, on Mr. Ledoux's orders."

The house was luxuriously furnished, but had none of the trappings of a mystic. No gaudy draperies or tapestries, no incense to choke the lungs. Everything was spotlessly clean and tidy. The Black Bat sat down in a comfortable chair.

HOFFMAN straddled a straight-backed one and smiled at him.

"I suppose you wonder what this is all about. You know, it's an honor having a man like you here. Really it is. I've read so much about you, the way you fight crooks and uphold the law. That's what I always wanted to be—a great detective, but I'm not cut out for that."

"Thanks for the compliment," the Black Bat said. "Nice of you, especially since I came, without invitation to make an investigation. Tell me what goes on?"

"Certainly I'll tell you. Have a cigarette, or a cigar. We have only the very best here. Now you went to know about Mr. Ledoux, of course. He is an Oxford man. He traveled in his youth and became interested in the beliefs and practices of various sects all over the world. Some theories he accepted, some he rejected. Those he believed in have become the basis for his work here."

"Including dervish whirling?" the Black Bat asked.

Hoffman threw up both hands in a gesture of horror. "Indeed not. It does more harm than good. No, Mr. Ledoux's clients come here for a rest. A strange sort of rest, you may say. They work to the point of exhaustion every moment of the day. They till the soil, break rocks, cut trees. All sorts of manual labor. They become tired because fatigue is necessary so that their bodies and minds are utterly relaxed. Then they can absorb the teachings of Mr. Ledoux."

"I see," the Black Bat nodded. "In their exhaustion they can be controlled by Mr. Ledoux's brain or will power. Is that it?"

"Roughly, yes. Before the clients leave, they have cleansed themselves of all habits, good and bad. They acquire new habits, new routines and they are able to cope with the hectic conditions of these times. Private rest sanitariums do the same thing only in a lesser way. I—excuse me, Mr. Ledoux will see you now."

"How did you know?" the Black Bat asked quickly.

Hoffman chuckled. "He told me so. He doesn't have to speak in order that his believers will know what he is thinking. Come this way, please."

They passed through the immense reception hall again and up one of the two winding stairways to

the second floor. Hoffman opened a door and the Black Bat looked into a well appointed office. That was all—just an office. Still no trappings. Behind a desk sat Jules Ledoux, wholly at ease and smoking a cigarette in a long holder.

He arose and stretched his hand across the desk.

"You are most welcome, Black Bat. Please sit down. Hoffman, that's all for now."

The door closed and the Black Bat felt that he was in the presence of either a man with wholesome powers which he wished to use for the good of mankind or—he faced a devil incarnate.

"You no doubt wonder how I knew you were coming, Black Bat? You thought about me too hard and it so happened that I was blanking out my mind for a rest at the time. Your thought waves came through as you slipped up to the house, trying to find a way in. Good heavens, man, what's the matter with the front door?"

The Black Bat laughed, genuinely. "You live up to your reputation, Mr. Ledoux. Yes, I was thinking about you. Do you know what I was thinking?"

"At that moment, no." Ledoux was staring steadily at the hood-encased head of his visitor. "But right now you are about to tell me of a murder. Who is dead? It must be someone I know. Otherwise why should you be interested in me?"

The Black Bat had received a shock. Ledoux was no fake. He could read minds and he did so. This man was dangerous whether he was good or bad.

"You are right," the Black Bat said quickly, so that he wouldn't think too much and reveal his true identity without meaning to do so. "A young man named Ronnie Raynor was murdered a short time ago."

"Ronnie?" Ledoux closed both eyes and heaved a great sigh, "I could have prophesied that. Ronnie was a good pupil at first. One of the best, but he went too far. He dabbled in black magic which is a dangerous thing."

"You mean dervish whirling?"

"Yes, and fetishes. He believed in all manner of evil rites and I could not drive them from his mind."

The Black Bat placed the photograph of the doll before Ledoux.

"You understand this too, then? It was in Ronnie's possession when I found him dead. He'd been doing his dervish whirling act, blindfolded for better concentration. Somebody stepped up and slit his throat with a razor."

LEDOUX picked up the photograph and winced. "You know what this is? Of course, because you are an intelligent man. This picture shows a witch's doll, such as they use today in Africa and other parts of the world. The idea is that this doll wears something belonging to the man it represents, a little hair, fingernail clippings, anything to give it the personal touch. The red cord around the throat is slowly tightened and as it grows tighter and tighter, the man whom the doll represents is supposed to die—of throat trouble."

"Ronnie certainly had an acute case of it," the Black Bat said. "Do you believe in this stuff, Ledoux?"

"No," Ledoux said curtly. "It is safer not to believe in it, for when you do not believe, these charms cannot harm you. The victim must have as much faith in the power of these witch dolls as the man who intends to harm him. Without that, the dolls never work. Ronnie—had faith."

"And so he died," the Black Bat commented slowly. "If I could find the man who constructed this doll and has been tightening the crimson cord, then I'd find Ronnie's murderer. That man slit the boy's throat. Ronnie may have believed, but his enemy didn't believe in the doll. He made certain by murdering Ronnie and I intend to run him down and put him where he belongs, in the electric chair."

"Which is a permanent cure for murderers," Ledoux smiled, "But why did you come to me?"

"Because Ronnie was a student of yours. So is another young man named Charles Barlow. Ronnie was murdered in Barlow's house and that doesn't look too well for Barlow because he is in trouble too."

Ledoux raised his eyebrows, "Ronnie and Barlow were close friends. That may explain why Ronnie was murdered in the Barlow home. As for Barlow, you refer to his arrest on a charge of theft. Why should it interest me?"

The Black Bat arose. "The police have an impression that Barlow was under your mental power when he lifted that necklace. They think you directed him to do that by thought waves."

Ledoux gasped and bit his lower lip until it turned white. He half arose and then sank back rather weakly.

"This is serious," he said. "I'm glad you came here, Black Bat. Such suspicions could ruin me. The slightest taint against my character would spoil all the good I am doing. It must not happen."

"I can't stop it," the Black Bat said. "Neither can you, unless your power of will is strong enough to erase those impressions in the minds of everyone involved. Ledoux, I'm not saying you are a fake, or if you are, that you are not a benevolent fake. You have demonstrated remarkable and unexplainable powers to me. Frankly, I'm afraid of you, but the cops won't be because they don't have to mask a dual identity as I do."

Ledoux waved a hand impatiently. "If I did read your mind and discovered who you really were, the secret would be safe with me, Black Bat. But what can I do about the police?"

"Stay put. If they come, treat them as you treated me. Hide nothing, but don't, whatever you do, give any exhibitions of your mind reading or will power. The strongest will couldn't get you between the bars of a detention cell and that's exactly where you will land."

"Please leave me," Ledoux begged. "Come back any time you wish. Right now I'm mentally upset. I must cure myself of this condition or my students will suffer too. There isn't much time. It takes hours."

Before the Black Bat reached the door, Ledoux was leaning back in his chair with both eyes tightly closed and gradually a look of incredible peace came over his face. The Black Bat shrugged and went out.

As he descended the steps, the Black Bat realized the house was just as quiet as before. Hoffman was nowhere in sight so the Black Bat decided to inspect the lower floor. He strolled through an intensely dark room which looked like a greenhouse with all the flowers which were placed around it. He saw a brass plate fastened to one wall and read it in the darkness.

THE LLOYD AUBREY ROOM

The Black Bat frowned. Lloyd Aubrey was a widely known financier with a tendency to splurge on esoteric affairs.

TWO years ago Aubrey had financed a spiritualist who had been promptly exposed as a fake. He'd taken a Hindu under his wing, a man who proclaimed himself a magician endowed with vast powers and he'd promptly been cleansed of these fake powers by the searing white light of publicity and investigation. Now it seemed that Lloyd Aubrey had discovered a new racket and was putting his money into it.

Resuming his travels, the Black Bat discovered a business office. He entered, found filing cabinets carefully locked and opened them in a matter of seconds with a slim bit of steel he had devised for just such purposes.

A quick examination of the files made the Black Bat whistle his surprise. Here was a list of Ledoux's clients, all intelligent, wealthy and influential. No leader of any cult or unusual belief had ever before assembled representatives of so much money.

There were thick folders concerned with eight young men, all of excellent families. It seemed these eight had placed themselves wholly under Ledoux's teachings and were being trained to carry on the work. Among them were Charles Barlow and Ronnie Raynor.

Confidential notes concerning Ronnie Raynor interested the Black Bat. They indicated he was rebellious, too ambitious and leaned toward the fantastic side of will power. As Ledoux had said, Ronnie had gone too far, learned too much and had come to a grisly end,

The Black Bat pursed his lips. There was a sound motive behind Ronnie's murder and a clever killer. The Black Bat made notes of each student's name and address for future reference. He wondered how many other wealthy persons were financially interested in this strange man. Could any of them be using Ledoux as a cover-up?

To further complicate matters, he also discovered many references to two men in particular. Lloyd Aubrey was a heavy financial backer. Another prominent man, also a disciple of Ledoux, had already contributed the sum of thirty thousand dollars. His name was Harvey Verne, a collector of art treasures and jewelry.

There were many angles to this case. Most of them would lead nowhere, but there must be one which could be followed straight to a warped brain which even Ledoux couldn't cleanse. The Black Bat left the house silently and without announcing his departure.

CHAPTER VI

Dangerous Barrier

WARILY the Black Bat moved toward the big gate, barring the entrance. All around him were stately trees, thick shrubs and a tall hedge. On catlike feet, he proceeded through the darkness, his mind filled with thoughts of this strange man, Jules Ledoux and the bizarre things he taught,

It was just a gentle scraping sound—of an arm against a small branch—that put him on the alert. It came from the left, just beyond the hedge.

Instantly, the Black Bat halted and stood rigid, ears attuned for further warnings. His eyes penetrated the darkness in search for anyone intending to waylay him. Things had gone almost too easily on this estate. He never questioned that someone here had sinister designs.

No further sound came and he saw no one. Even his abnormal eyes couldn't penetrate some of the thick shrubs. He started walking, purposely making a little noise. Then it came. From either side of the hedge, figures leaped at him. Two men bounded forward with amazing speed. They were silent and deadly.

There was no time to draw a gun. However, so far as the Black Bat was concerned, he welcomed the chance of taking a prisoner for questioning.

The first man dived for the Black Bat's legs, depending on darkness to shroud his movements. The Black Bat saw him lunge and moved agilely aside almost into the path of the plunging second man.

A fist smacked across his cheek bone. For a fraction of a second, the Black Bat's senses reeled. The pair of attackers recovered and came at him once more. As they rushed, the Black Bat also leaped forward. He met one of them head on and was braced for the impact. The attacker, off guard, went hurtling back.

The second man veered off. The Black Bat was after him in a flash. Several long steps and he overtook the man, grabbed him by the collar and hauled him around. At this point an ordinary crook would have grown either wild with rage or limp with defeat. This fellow did neither. Instead he started really fighting and he did it coolly.

"Remove hood from Black Bat," the man panted, speaking in a monotone.

"Remove hood from Black Bat," the other attacker mumbled from where he was picking himself up from the ground.

To the Black Bat it sounded as if these two men had received telepathic orders to snatch off his hood. They fought bitterly, took unusual punishment without even a grunt of pain and kept coming back like robots. It occurred to the Black Bat that they fought that way too.

He danced backward a few steps. The attackers followed closely, fists swinging and occasionally hitting their mark. The Black Bat hadn't taken a beating like this in years. Yet, neither of the two used weapons of any kind.

A long swing started for the Black Bat's head. He arched back, let it hiss by and then snapped forward again. His right fist cracked against the attacker's jaw and sent him hurtling against the hedge. It was a blow that would have knocked out almost anyone, but the attacker made no sound and merely got back on his feet where he swayed dizzily.

The second man was crouched for a charge, but he seemed to be hesitating. Then he spoke in that same monotone.

"Retreat. Get away at once."

The other man, half supported by the hedge, repeated the few words, turned and fled headlong through the brush. The other turned and raced away into the night.

The Black Bat was breathing hard. These two men were young, agile, and trained athletes. If there had been three, he wondered what the consequences would have been. As matters stood now, there was no guarantee they wouldn't come back with reinforcements. The Black Bat decided a hasty exit was by far the most healthy way out of this strange estate.

He trotted silently along the path. If the big gates were closed, he intended to scale them fast. Almost within sight of the gates however, he again heard a stealthy approach of someone. As that person neared, he made plenty of noise and headed for a spot alongside the path some yards ahead.

He appeared suddenly, one of the original pair. Arms swinging, body crouched, he began dancing toward the Black Bat. He weaved from side to side, kept always in motion to pin the Black Bat's attention firmly upon him.

Twisting his head suddenly, the Black Bat caught a glimpse of the second man slipping along the inner side of the hedge. He was going to attack just as his companion started a wild drive at the Black Bat.

THIS position was dangerous and impossible. The Black Bat suddenly vaulted the hedge and raced off into the darkness. Both men started after him, still silent and still moving as if they received thought wave instructions from someone who knew every move being made.

The Black Bat purposely made enough noise to draw the men on. Then he stopped short and waited. There was a quarter moon and a few stars, resulting in faint light that revealed him dimly. One thing about this pair, if they were receiving telepathic orders, they obeyed them, for one of the two veered off to the north and disappeared while the other started that same methodical approach to keep the Black Bat's attention.

The Black Bat stepped behind a tree. Peering through the darkness he located the man who stalked him. Carefully now, the Black Bat moved to cut the man off. He did, neatly, because the Black Bat could see in darkness while his opponent had to stumble around.

As the man passed by, the Black Bat leaped out, wound an arm around his throat and muffled any cry. Not that the man seemed ready to shout for help, but the Black Bat's unexpected attack did draw a gasp of sudden terror. Holding the man fast, the Black Bat waited until his struggles ceased. Then he held him at arm's length, studied a young face, now mottled from being choked, and sent home a haymaker.

He was none too soon for the second of the pair was approaching. The Black Bat let him get fairly close and then took the offensive himself. The man hesitated, turned and began running wildly through the brush. But like his mate, darkness handicapped him and he constantly stumbled against small trees or bushes.

The Black Bat caught up with him easily, whirled him around and knocked him out with a right cross to the chin. This man too, was young. The Black Bat searched both of them and found nothing in their pockets. Not even a cigarette or a match. He ripped off their belts and neckties, fashioned stout ropes and tied both prisoners securely.

This accomplished, he hurried back to the house. One thing he wanted to know.

Was Jules Ledoux still in his semi-trance and giving mental orders to this pair? Or was it Hoffman, the manager—or anyone else—who set those two young men on his trail? The front door was locked, the house was dark. The Black Bat opened the door with a master key, slipped inside and went straight to Ledoux's quarters. The master of this cult was not there.

It occurred to the Black Bat then, that even if Ledoux was in no way responsible, the estate and the castle-like house were dangerous for intruders. Carol and Butch would find themselves in plenty of trouble if they aroused the slightest suspicions.

He left the house as quietly as he entered, made his way straight back to the spot where he'd left the two attackers and even before he reached the vicinity, he knew they were gone. The necktie and leather belt ropes had been slit with a sharp blade and lay on the grass.

The Black Bat stood erect, listening intently. Nothing stirred, but that didn't mean much. He moved quietly in the direction of the steel fence. The gates would be undoubtedly guarded.

At an isolated section of the estate, he reached the edge of a cleared area in front of the fence. His abnormal eyes pierced the darkness and he noticed that all along the fence, and on both sides, shrubs and trees had been carefully cleared away. That was significant. The fence must be charged with electricity at times and they were making certain nobody could climb a tree, crawl out on a limb and drop over the fence. It hadn't been charged when he entered, but now it most certainly was.

He crouched, trying to figure a way out of this trap. Then he heard them coming and there were many more than two men this time. They had spread out in a long line to ransack the whole estate up to the fence.

Something else brought cold sweat to his forehead under that black hood. He could hear a steady droning sound, like the hum of a dynamo. The fence was being charged then. To touch it would mean death.

Hurdling the fence was impossible. It was ten or twelve feet high with slanted extensions to make it harder to climb. Not a single avenue of escape offered itself, so the Black Bat set about formulating a scheme to make his own avenue.

He took the steel chain from his pocket and moved in the direction of the gate. Through parted branches of a bush he could see two rifle-armed men standing nearby, ready for business.

HASTILY the Black Bat moved away from the area, listened for the approach of the others and when they were fairly close, he hurled the chain at the fence, and dropped the free end to the ground. It hit, made a flash of blue fire and gave a crackling sound like a miniature lightning bolt.

"He touched the fence," someone shouted. "Let's go get him."

The Black Bat scurried closer to the big gate and stretched himself flat behind deep grass and shrubs. He lay there, silent, with his head raised, listening.

"It was near this point where the flash came," somebody said. "He must be unconscious or dead. But where is he?"

"Could he have gotten over?" another voice asked. "He's a smart chap, the Black Bat. Nobody ever cornered him yet, but the flash shows he was struck. We might find him on the other side of the fence." In the darkness they failed to see the dangling chain.

"That must be it," a third, quite unfamiliar, voice added. "He walked without making a sound, so he was equipped with rubber shoes. Perhaps rubber gloves, too, and they insulated him until he missed getting down. We'll look on the other side of the fence."

Several of the men unwittingly passed within a dozen yards of where the Black Bat lay. None suspected the man they sought was close by. The gate guards opened up quickly. The Black Bat counted. Eight men passed through the gate and started running down the outside of the fence.

Just as the Black Bat planned and hoped, the gate guards followed the others. After all, they were all certain that the Black Bat was either dead or unconscious.

The Black Bat slipped up to the gate, waited a few seconds and then calmly walked through to safety. But when he got behind the wheel of his car, he felt weak. For one of the few times in his career, he felt that he was up against something which might prove too powerful to master.

Those men, for instance, were educated. They were accustomed to using their brains. They'd been tricked, but even the smartest of men can be tricked sometimes.

Then, there were those two who had attacked originally. The pair who seemed to be getting telepathic orders. If Ledoux was behind it—if he could send orders by brain waves, then he was a menace, whether a good man or evil.

The Black Bat shivered and drove away from

As the two attackers rushed again, the Black Bat sent one of them reeling backward.

the spot. He actually enjoyed the sight of street light, even If they were dimmed out. Now he could plan and prepare the stage for a blow against whatever satanic influence lay behind this mystery.

The Black Bat didn't know that events had moved fast while he was busy at Jules Ledoux's estate.

CHAPTER VII
Murder Attends a Party

ONLY people of the very beat families attended the affair, one of the deluxe types. They came bedecked in all their jewels and finery. There were stuffed wallets in the pockets of the men, for the party had been called for the purpose of selling as many war bonds as possible. Only cash would be used on the theory that the sight of actual cash might help the sales. It was, in fact, society's big war-time fling.

There were some differences though. Some people arrived in taxicabs, but many of them walked. A few came via horse and carriage especially hired for the evening.

The affair was being held in a theater. Seats had been ripped out and replaced with tables and decorations. There would be a floor show, stars of screen and stage.

Vanity was present, too, for each woman came bedecked with the gems usually locked in safe deposit vaults. At the door, Lloyd Aubrey greeted the guests. He was head of the reception committee. Aubrey was a tall, stately man with iron gray hair and smiling lips. His manners were smooth, polished.

Harvey Verne was there, too, but only as a guest. He didn't look much like Aubrey. Verne was short, corpulent and bald-headed. Expensive tailors fitted his clothes, but even they couldn't do a great deal with his rotund figure. Verne hustled about though and seemed to be popular,

The affair began an hour late. As the doors closed, a small army of private and city detectives moved about, surrounding the place. They were filtered in among the guests too, and Captain McGrath took charge.

Awkward looking in stiff collar and shirt front, McGrath stayed near the doors, his dress coat bulging slightly over his holstered gun.

Acts, which would have cost small fortunes to hire, had been donated. An orchestra that played to the tune of five thousand dollars a night, was giving their all for nothing. The party soon warmed up.

Precisely at eleven-thirty, when the affair was at its height, every light went out. There were no windows, all exits were completely blocked and the darkness was intense. For a few seconds, everyone sat quietly. A few guests were tittering, believing it all part of the show. Shortly after, a woman screamed and then another and another. Someone cursed and there came the sound of individual fights arising in various parts of the vast hall.

Flashlights were turned on but most of them were promptly knocked out of their owners' hands and sent dashing to the floor. Above the uproar arose one particularly terrible scream. It was cut short. McGrath could surmise what it meant. He stumbled around in the darkness, imploring people to remain quiet, keeping his voice level. A panic could begin at any second.

McGrath found one of his detectives, "Find your way to the office and phone for help—plenty of help," he said. "Also tell the boys outside to form a cordon. Nobody leaves."

McGrath made his way backstage, but it took him an uncomfortably long time because he had to literally battle his way through the milling crowd. Using matches, he located the switchboard where two electricians were frantically working.

"Police," McGrath announced himself. "What happened?"

"Somebody cut the main cable," one electrician explained. "We've found the break. It will take another couple of minutes before we'll have light."

The screams and curses were growing as McGrath made his way onto the stage. He fell over props, added a few curses of his own and was facing the crowd when the lights were turned on again.

For a few seconds he couldn't see anything. Then the full horror of what had happened struck him forcefully.

One gray-haired woman—certainly sixty-five—lay on the floor, her head soaked with gore. Two other women were down, unconscious. Several men reeled around, holding bloody heads. Others displayed torn clothing.

"Attention, everyone," McGrath yelled, "Please—you're safe now. This building is surrounded by police. Nobody can escape. If there are any doctors present, get busy and attend the injured!"

In five minutes McGrath had the grim story. The gray-haired woman was dead.

"She was beaten to death with blackjacks," a doctor reported. "There are a dozen blackjacks on the floor. Three other women and two men are badly hurt. Ambulances should be summoned at once."

IT SEEMED to the police captain this was an excellent suggestion.

"Go to it," McGrath answered. "You'll find some

of my men in the office. Get those ambulances here."

McGrath walked off the stage and down to the hall. He was taking notes on what had been stolen when the first ambulance arrived. Two white-coated men carried in a stretcher. They went straight to the nearest victim, hardly recognizable as Lloyd Aubrey. His face was swollen, his gray hair bloody. They placed him on a stretcher and hurried away. More ambulances arrived. The badly injured were removed and those who suffered only lacerations, treated on the spot.

McGrath returned to the office and had it cleared. He sat down and studied his notes, He had no idea as to what the robbery would finally amount to, but nearly two hundred thousand dollars in cash was missing, to say nothing of the gems which would run into much higher figures.

McGrath picked up the phone and called Tony Quinn's home. Although McGrath didn't know it, the delay which Silk exhibited in getting Quinn to the phone was caused by the fact that the Black Bat had entered his secret lab just as the call came. He had to remove his black clothes and put on those worn by Tony Quinn.

"It may sound funny, but I'm asking you to come," McGrath said after he made a brief explanation. "I remember the days when you were D.A. I need help. Corday would only gum things up. Even if you are blind, please give me a hand."

"I'll be there as quickly as possible," Quinn answered.

"What's happened?" Silk Kirby asked as Quinn hung up. "1 never heard McGrath so excited. Is he baiting another trap to show you up as the Black Bat?"

"No," Quinn answered slowly. "This is the McCoy. I've been expecting something like it to happen, but not in the proportions of this job. That society jamboree at the old Lane Theatre was crashed by crooks who simply socked anybody near them and took jewels and money. One woman is dead and a couple of other people expected to die,"

Silk whistled. "Jules Ledoux's work, sir? Maybe he's got some of his disciples there. What did McGrath want?"

"My help. Have you forgotten I'm an assistant district attorney? Get the car out, Silk. I'll go there and stumble around like a blind man, but we may pick up a clue. Hurry!"

Police in the front of the building passed Quinn through the lines. On Silk Kirby's arm, Quinn moved along tapping with a cane. McGrath rushed up.

"It's me," he announced. "McGrath. Silk, take Mr. Quinn into the office."

"No," Quinn said. "I'd rather be at the scene of the crime. I can't see, but I can hear and sense things. Were those police on duty outside all the time?"

"Nobody—not even a second Houdini— could have left the place," McGrath vowed. "I was afraid something would happen. These people came dolled up in a few million dollars' worth of jewels and it was well known the men would be carrying large sums of cash. Good publicity but bad for the Police Department. That's why I assigned so many men."

Quinn's apparently sightless eyes stared straight ahead, but he saw things, nevertheless. First of all, he noticed dapper little Harvey Verne, Jules Ledoux's financial backer, was patting a lump on his head.

"Is Lloyd Aubrey around?" Quinn asked McGrath. "I heard he was attending the party,"

"They took him away," McGrath explained. "Possible fractured skull. All the money he brought was swiped."

"But it must be somewhere in this building," Quinn said. "Your cordon certainly prevented anyone from carrying it out. Have you searched the people here?"

"They're being searched," McGrath grunted. "I got policewomen taking care of the ladies. But somehow, I have an idea we won't find a thing. This was done too smoothly. The thugs used lead saps and didn't care how hard they hit. We found eleven of the blackjacks on the floor. Not a print on 'em, of course."

Quinn stood there, silently surveying the crowd although the best eye surgeon in the country would have sworn those blank eyes saw nothing, Yet they noticed many things. Chiefly his attention centered upon several young men, as excited as anyone else, but exhibiting a tendency to cling together.

"Silk," Quinn said in a low voice, "leave me here. Mingle with the crowd and find out the names of those young fellows, just below the stage. Come back as soon as you know know."

SILK KIRBY drifted away and, with an astonishing ease, he was soon in conversation with several persons. Silk's days as a confidence man were valuable. He still possessed a glib, persuading tongue.

"What the heck!" Captain McGrath came up astounded to find Tony Quinn alone, being jostled at times by some of the excited people.

Quinn smiled. "Don't worry about me, Captain, Silk just took a little walk. You can't tell what he might pick up and anyway, he is my eyes. I told him to look for suspicious characters."

"Suspicious characters," McGrath ridiculed. "You're losing your old knack, Quinn. There are no

suspicious persons here. That's what makes this job so darned difficult."

"By the way," Quinn said, "who was injured so seriously as to need hospital attention?"

McGrath consulted his notebook and rattled off some names. Included among them was Lloyd Aubrey. Tony Quinn made no comment about this.

"Who organized the party?" he queried.

"A guy named Verne. Little fellow, kind of chunky. It was his brain child. But don't get thinking things about him. Quinn, Verne has more money than he'll ever need. He wouldn't stoop to robbery and murder. Not by a long shot."

"People do strange things;" Quinn answered meditatively. "I've known of thieves who robbed only for the thrill. I've heard of murderers who did the same thing. It's like the man who turns in a false alarm to see the red engines roll and then wriggles out of the mess. You never can tell."

"Maybe not," McGrath sighed. "I've got to mosey around. I'll—oh, oh, you ought to see what strolled in."

"The Honorable Paul Corday, District Attorney," Quinn said with half a smile. "Your boss and mine, I can tell, Captain, by the tone of your voice. I can't blame you for not asking him."

"Boy," McGrath ground between his teeth, "wouldn't it be a honey if he turned out to be the guy who bossed this job? Oh—hello, Mr. Corday. I figured you'd get down here as soon as you heard about it."

"I heard about it over the radio," Corday snapped. "I see, however, you called Quinn into the case. What makes you think a blind man would be valuable? No offense meant, Quinn. I'm talking to McGrath and being frank about it."

"1 should say brutally frank," Quinn said. "However, you're right. I'm of no use here, Good luck, Corday. I hope you land the guilty parties."

"I will, no fear of that," Corday said tartly. "Crooks are usually ignorant creatures. Captain, you will remain with me."

As Quinn walked away tapping with his cane, Silk Kirby came back and spoke softly into the supposed blind man's ear.

"I know their names, sir," he said. "Webb, Harger, Kean, Deering and Alton. They attend lots of affairs like this."

"Hm," Quinn mused. "They also attend Jules Ledoux's classes to cleanse the mind and the body. Looking at them right now, I wouldn't say they were stupified or under the influence of Ledoux. They don't act like young Barlow did, when he was trapped in that jewelry store. Yet they are in the same category with him."

"Yes, sir," Kirby said. "Is there anything else you want me to do?"

"We'll leave," Quinn said. "After taking me away from this theater, you can get out of the car and return. When those young men come out, follow them. I'll risk driving home myself."

CHAPTER VIII
Witch Doll In Black

FROM a safe spot where he had slipped out of the car, Silk watched it disappear with Tony Quinn at the wheel. Silk Kirby shook his head gloomily. Quinn was taking a big chance. The slightest accident would reveal Quinn was not blind.

This made Silk realize how important his mission must be. He turned back, reached a suitable place and stepped into a dark doorway across the street.

Persons were leaving the theater in small groups. Finally, one of the young men emerged, stuck both hands into the pockets of his topcoat and headed north. Silk gave him almost a city block's handicap and then he proceeded to follow.

In this work Silk was apt. Slim of build, dressed in dark clothing, he could quickly fade out of sight along almost any street. The young man he followed walked swiftly, passed up a subway station, several bus stops and some trolley lines. Yet he was covering a lot of ground. Silk wondered why he didn't take some faster means of transportation than his own two feet. There must be a reason, Silk knew.

For the better part of an hour, Kirby kept on the trail, but he was becoming worried. Now and then he felt sure that someone was trailing him. Once he saw a man in a gray topcoat who took the same route for a considerable distance. Yet a few momenta later he was gone and the only person who was behind wore dark clothes and a gray hat. He in turn was replaced by someone else and Silk breathed easier.

The young man he trailed was heading deep into a slum area, much to Silk Kirby's surprise, but he clung to the scent tenaciously and never lost sight of the man. Finally, his quarry stopped under a street light, touched a match to a cigarette and slowly made a complete turn so that he could observe in all directions. He did not see Silk Kirby.

The young man then walked about a third of a block along a row of two-story buildings, jammed so closely together as to give the appearance they were all the same structure. He stopped again, in front of one of the stores that occupied the ground floor.

Reaching into his pocket he took out a key, stepped into a doorway and vanished. Silk heard a door click shut as he hurried toward the place. It

turned out to be a store, apparently vacant, with windows screened with bill posters. A careful trial showed the door was securely locked.

He went down the street and stepped into some deep shadows where he waited about ten minutes. None of the other young men appeared and Silk grew worried. Perhaps they were all assembled in there. They could have reached the scene by much faster routes.

Silk Kirby crossed the street. From there he saw that the empty store showed no light. The neighboring store, on the right, was operated by a hardware and sporting goods firm.

Knowing such places, Kirby guessed, in all probability, the empty store and the hardware store shared a common cellar or were separated only by flimsy wooden walls. He wanted to get inside, learn what was going on. In his opinion, the ideal method was to gain access through the hardware store.

Accordingly, he went to the rear of the building, approached the hardware store and studied one of the back windows. It was nailed shut, but that didn't deter Silk.

With his knife he went to work on the putty which held the pane of glass in place. He soon stripped off the putty, attacked the little triangular bite of metal which held the glass firm and, in short order, worked it free.

Carefully placing the pane of glass on the ground, he hauled himself through the aperture. Not being gifted with uncanny eyesight like the Black Bat, he had to move very carefully. Twice he used matches to get around corners, but at last he stood before the cellar door.

He unlocked it, opened the door a bit and listened. No sound reached him. He picked up a small hatchet for a weapon, went down the steps and lighted more matches to find the cellarway of the vacant store. It proved to be a common cellar and he had no difficulty in reaching what he sought.

He moved up the steps to the vacant store, stopped halfway and rubbed his chin. He recalled those men who seemed to have followed, but were replaced by other persons. He remembered that the young man he trailed had walked this very long distance. Silk Kirby thought he knew the reason why. These men had agreed to meet at this vacant store, but to make certain there was no danger each one followed another. Silk had been deceived because once they knew he was on trail, they'd switched with one another yet without ever losing Silk.

THAT meant they'd be ready for him. Perhaps they'd even seen him go around to the back of the building and get into the hardware store. Kirby resumed climbing the steps, but his sense of impending danger grew greater and greater. He

SILK

carefully pressed one ear against the door and heard nothing.

"They could have slipped into the cellar and got clear by using another of these stores in the block," Silk reasoned."All of them have a common cellar."

He grasped the knob firmly and turned it, prepared to hurl himself down the steps at the slightest show of attack. Still nothing happened. He opened the door by fractions of an inch. Darkness met his eyes. Then the door seemed to touch something yielding and soft. Silk Kirby quickly dropped his hand and backed down the cellar steps. He didn't like the set-up and above all, Silk was noted for being careful.

A quick trip back to the hardware store netted him a fishing rod, a mirror and a flashlight. He tied the mirror to the end of the fish line, thrust the rod through the slightly open door and switched on the flash. Faintly reflected in the mirror was a chair. A wholly innocent piece of furniture except that tied to the back of it was a shotgun with the twin muzzles pointed straight at the door.

"Shotgun trap," Silk Kirby gulped and sat down on the steps. He felt weak. That had been one of the closest shaves of his colorful career. It meant, of course, that the young man or men had succeeded in getting clear, but they knew he was coming and had prepared this deadly welcome.

Silk reached an arm through the door, touched the cord which would be pulled if the door opened any further, and guessed just how much play it had before setting off the gun. Not much, he guessed, but enough so that he could risk cutting the cord. His knife did the trick. When he pushed the door now, it opened without obstruction.

Silk stepped into the room, the hatch half raised. It was a back room, heavily curtained so that no light would emanate. He went over to the shotgun and carefully released the twin triggers. Then he felt better. The sweat ceased to flow down his face.

There was a rickety old table in one corner and two chairs. Not much in the way of clues. Silk turned on the overhead light, a weak bulb that barely eliminated shadow. He saw something on the table and went over to it, careful not to fall into any more booby traps.

His foot landed on something round and smooth. Silk almost pitched over on his face. Recovering his balance, he bent down and picked up a small black object. Silk rolled it between his fingers and knew what he held. It was a perfect black pearl. The real stuff. Silk knew his gems as well as any pawnshop broker.

Then he forgot the black pearl, forgot the booby trap and everything else. He stared at a photograph. It showed, vividly clear, a doll—dressed as the Black Bat. The face was covered by a miniature hood, the clothing was jet black but, around the doll's forehead was a cord, twisted tightly.

Silk Kirby picked up the photograph and found it still damp. The thing had been developed only a short time before. Silk had thought he'd known fear when the mirror on the fish line revealed that shotgun trap, but that was as nothing compared to what he felt now.

Silk was acquainted with these witch dolls, and he was decidedly superstitious.

He quickly put the pearl and photograph in his pocket, paused long enough to remove the shells from the shotgun and then left via the front door, which was locked from inside. Making certain he was unobserved, after walking briskly for a dozen blocks, he hailed a taxi and had himself driven to the neighborhood of Tony Quinn's home.

There he dismissed the cab, ran the rest of the way and literally bolted into the house. Quinn, seated in the study, looked up with a start as Silk entered.

"What happened?" he asked anxiously.

Silk Kirby couldn't talk at first. He was too winded, but he proceeded to draw the window shades before taking the photo from his pocket, Tony Quinn looked at it and burst out laughing.

"Why, Silk," he chided, "don't tell me you believe in these things."

"No," Silk managed. "No, I don't believe in 'em, but I'm scared stiff of 'em. That Raynor kid got one of these and look what happened to him."

QUINN smiled at his faithful friend and follower.

"Sit down, Silk," he urged. "I'll put you straight on this. You followed one of the young men some place. He knew you were on his trail, and he believed you were the Black Bat. Knowing you as I do, I'm sure he never caught more than a glimpse of you and even if you did vaguely resemble Silk Kirby, whoever saw you would hardly believe that. After all, they knew at the party that you were supposed to be driving me home and it would be impossible for you to return so quickly."

"Okay." Silk forgot formality. "Maybe that's so, but it doesn't make that doggone witch doll any less dangerous."

"Look here," Quinn said patiently. "These dolls have been used in the practice of witchcraft for centuries. Today, in some primitive parts of the world, people believe in them. They discover one has been made with, like that one, a cord twisted around the head, and the person it represents at once gets a headache or becomes dizzy. Anything associated with the head and brain. These pains are imaginary but nonetheless dangerous because—and only because—the victim actually believes a witch doll can kill."

"Has it ever been proven one can't kill?" Silk parried. "Remember, this guy Ledoux studied stuff of this nature. He knows all about 'em and he isn't a normal person by any means. I tell you, it worries me stiff."

Quinn placed the photograph between the pages of a thick volume.

"Lucky, then, that it isn't you whom the doll represents. I don't believe, Silk. It can't harm me and whoever prepared it knows this as well as I do. In my opinion this was left as either a declaration of open war against, or a warning to, the Black Bat. In either case I'm glad to accept it. Now give me all the details."

Silk did, an elaborate account of his mission. He added, "Believe me, those youngsters are implicated. Oh, yes, I found this on the floor in that vacant store. It's a black pearl. No fake stuff. The real thing,"

Quinn took the pearl and whistled softly. "You're right, Silk. Entirely correct. One of the victims at that stickup lost a string of black pearls on the floor there, too."

"You're an assistant D.A.," Silk said hopefully. "Why not issue a warrant for the arrest of these kids?"

Quinn leaned back, tucked a fresh supply of tobacco in his pipe and applied flame. Through the rising smoke, his eyes appeared blank and staring again.

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully, "what would happen if I did? We'd implicate ourselves, of course, if you testified as to what occurred tonight. That's not much evidence and remember, those young men come of excellent families. Then, too, if they were locked up, what if they maintained that they knew nothing as to what happened? If they indicated they were under the spell of Ledoux's thought waves? Could men who committed crimes, not of their own volition, be convicted? I think not."

"You'd put an awful kink in Ledoux," Silk offered.

"True, and yet, are we certain Ledoux alone is behind this? Perhaps he is. Perhaps this unnatural power of his is being put to evil uses. He has power, Silk. He proved it with Captain McGrath."

"That stumblebum." Silk sniffed.

"Don't underestimate McGrath," Quinn warned. "He's smart and sly. No, McGrath fell under Ledoux's power all right and what happened is psychologically possible. We're up against a tough proposition. Ledoux would disclaim that power of his, say it was all a trick and I'd like to see the faces of a jury I was trying to convince that Ledoux was a crook by remote control."

"I suppose you're right." Silk groaned. "What will we do then?"

"Sit tight. Ledoux will strike again. We must catch him red-handed. Nothing short of that will suffice. Tomorrow Carol and Butch are set to go to Ledoux's castle or sanitarium or whatever he calls it. Everything is arranged. I talked to Carol before you came back."

"Yes, sir." Silk stood erect, the smooth servant again. But a frown crossed his face."If it wasn't for that witch doll, we'd be okay."

Quinn laughed. "Forget it, Silk. I don't believe in the thing and nothing else matters. I'll be busy tomorrow, too. So will you, escorting me around. I intend to take over the investigation of this stickup whether Corday likes it or not. There are two men in particular I want to question. As an assistant district attorney, of course. It's swell back in the harness, Silk. I've missed it more than I let on."

CHAPTER IX
The Stronger Mind

NEXT DAY, at mid-morning, a taxi rolled toward Ledoux's baronial estate. In the cab were Carol Baldwin and Butch O'Leary. He wore a chauffeur's uniform.

"We're all set," Carol Baldwin said softly, 'but I'm afraid this time, Butch. It's not like trying to trick an ordinary man, This Ledoux can read your mind. If he read the Black Bat's thoughts, what chance will we have?"

Butch carefully doubled one giant fist. "If he reads mine, I'll bet he starts running because all I'll think of is whether to bust his jaw or his neck."

Carol shook her head. "Strength alone won't win against Ledoux," she sighed. "We must consider the idea that he can read our minds. Therefore, if we face him, we must think of the fact that we are private detectives working for an assistant D.A. That's true, so we won't have any real doubts to shadow those thoughts. Tony is both the Black Bat and the assistant D.A."

The cab stopped at the big gates. Carol Baldwin handed over a sealed envelope. A guard read it, opened the gate and the taxi started up the incline toward the big house.

"So far so good," Carol said softly. "Tony gave me the name of a woman who was once a patient or client here. I talked with her last night, let her convince me Jules Ledoux's treatments are good for the soul and mind of a bored female and even got her to introduce me to Ledoux's manager who happened to be in town. That's why we got in so quickly, Butch,"

The taxi slowed for the stop in front of the rambling porch. Carol saw men and women

working in the gardens. Some men were engaged in breaking stones, others in wheeling the rock fragments away in barrows.

Butch laughed. "Look at that pipsqueak trying to bust a big rock, He slugs it about as hard as the slap of a humming bird. I could smash that thing with one blow."

"You won't get the chance," Carol said. "Only patients do that work so they will become exhausted and respond to Ledoux's treatments easier. Keep in mind the fact that you are a servant. Act like one and stay out of trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." Butch O'Leary stepped from the cab and touched the visor of his cap. "I'll watch it, ma'am."

He helped Carol to alight and then picked up her bags. Rotund little David Hoffman came running down the steps, his face lined in horror.

"You must carry your own bags," he said. 'It is part of the routine."

Butch O'Leary surrendered the bags without a trace of a smile. Carol Baldwin, encumbered by them, staggered up the stairs. Hoffman turned to Butch.

"We have provided quarters for you with the attendants of this estate. You will be quite comfortable and I cannot see any reason why this patient had to come and insist on taking a chauffeur along."

"Yeah," Butch grumbled, "I don't get it either, but I didn't want to lose my job. Maybe she thinks if I had a long vacation, I might work someplace else. She doesn't know me."

A man in overalls and a broad straw hat stepped up at Hoffman's call. He escorted Butch to his quarters. They proved to be a medium-sized room in a large one-story brick building. The overalled man hesitated at the door.

"Everything all right? Now listen, you don't mingle with the patients here. Don't even say good morning to them. They're not supposed to have any outside contacts. You can walk around, but stay behind this building and keep off the regular grounds. Is that clear?"

"Sure," Butch grumbled, "just like Sing-Sing, huh?"

"You might find it worse than Alcatraz if you start sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Mr. Ledoux gets sore easy and if he gets mad at you, things won't be so nice. Take a friendly tip, pal."

Butch sat down on the edge of his bed and wondered what would happen next. He was dissatisfied with the whole affair. Butch liked to plunge headlong into matters, use his fists and his great strength to batter the enemy down. Now it seemed he was confined to doing nothing, with plenty of time to do it in.

Carol, meantime, met Jules Ledoux and

BUTCH

instinctively she feared him. She didn't like his steady, burning eyes or the matter-of-fact way he handled things.

"Usually," Ledoux told her, "we do not accept strangers, but I made an exception for a former client who recommended you. And yet, I find she knew you only a matter of hours. Let me ask, bluntly, did you come for my treatments or have you some other purpose?"

CAROL kept her mind as clear as possible.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," she replied. "1 met that client of yours last night. She is a very nice, friendly person and when I told her I was bored with things, she recommended you. Is this an exceptional sanitarium or rest home?"

"Exceptional." Ledoux smiled. "Our method of treating clients differs from others. You may not like it at first, but I assure you after a few days you will find yourself completely changed."

"I hope so," Carol said. "My trouble is too much money and too much time. I'm bored to death. I can't get a kick out of anything. But—would you mind telling me why you asked if I came for some other purpose than to be treated?"

Ledoux stared at her. "We've had a little trouble. You see, my methods are so unconventional that sooner or later I expect an investigation and a spy may come here to pry into my business. However, I really don't mind. I have absolutely nothing to hide. Now you can go to your room and rest. Try to put all thoughts from your mind. Know you are in good hands and, above all, you will not be bored."

"I can readily believe that," Carol extended a slim hand. "I shall obey any directions you may give me."

A man in a white coat conducted Carol to one of the rooms on the third floor. It was the last word in luxury, equipped even to exotic, oriental perfumes. She went to the window and looked over the sloping estate. Then she stepped back quickly.

Butch O'Leary was ambling along behind a low brick building and not far back of him was another man whose obvious duty it was to shadow Butch. They suspected them then. Carol bit her lower lip in exasperation. It would be anything but easy to operate against suspicion as open as that.

David Hoffman came shortly afterward and discussed finances with her. He did it smoothly and made the astounding fee sound low indeed for the benefits she would derive.

"I wonder," she asked, "if I might send my chauffeur into town later on? I had no idea this was so expensive, but it really doesn't matter. I'll need more money and I have arranged with my bank to recognize a check presented by James—my chauffeur."

"You may do anything you like," Hoffman replied. "Until the treatments commence. Then you must place yourself entirely in the hands of Mr. Ledoux."

"What kind of treatments are they?" Carol asked.

"Purely mental. You will hardly know the effects of them until you suddenly realize how much better you feel, especially in your mind. Until Mr. Ledoux takes you in hand, you may visit other patients. Learn from them what he can do for you."

After Hoffman departed, Carol walked out of the room and wandered down the corridor. In one of the other rooms she saw an over-fed squat woman packing a suitcase. Carol knocked on the open door and stepped in,

"May I?" she asked. "I'm new here and I've been told to ask questions of other patients."

"Do come in." The woman straightened up and Carol saw that she was alert and bright-eyed, but she had an idea that complete rest in any kind of a home would have made this dowager feel better.

Carol sat down and offered the woman a cigarette.

"No thank you." She declined to smoke. "You won't like tobacco after you have been here awhile. Not that Mr. Ledoux objects to smoking. He merely leaves it up to you and ... you won't smoke. Now what do you wish to know?"

"Well," Carol said hesitantly, "you seem to be packing. Is your course of treatment finished or just beginning?"

'I'm not leaving permanently," she said. "My name is Mrs. Millard."

"Not the Mrs. Millard," Carol pretended a certain amount of awe.

"Yes, my dear." The woman fluttered and seemed pleased that a stranger should know of her. I'm going home only for a brief visit. You see, I've been here nine weeks and I feel so different. I'm not worried by worldly cares. Money doesn't mean anything to me anymore. Not so long as I can have the peace which Mr. Ledoux gives me."

"That's what I want," Carol sighed.

"You shall have it," Mr. Millard enthused. "Mr. Ledoux has done so much for me that I'm going home just for tonight. Arrangements have been made for a private auction. I am going to sell my diamond to the highest bidder. It is the Regal diamond. You have heard of it?"

Smiling, the blond girl nodded her pretty head.

"OF COURSE," she said genially. "It's worth millions, isn't it?"

"Well—frankly, no, I should say it would bring something over a hundred thousand dollars. I intend to present the proceeds to Mr. Ledoux so he may carry on his excellent work and, of course, to pay my way here, I mean to stay a long time."

"You do believe in him," Carol said. "If I had the opportunity, I might attend your auction and bid myself. It will be open, of course?"

"No, just to friends of mine and their friends. The Regal diamond must not be commercialized. I wouldn't permit that."

"And does Mr. Ledoux know of your generous intentions?"

"I told him this morning and he was so pleased because I had so much faith in him."

Carol arose. "I'll let you finish packing. Tomorrow we'll probably meet again. Thank you for being so encouraging."

Carol returned to her room. One of the men in a white coat was just beyond Mrs. Millard's door when Carol emerged and she was sure he hadn't passed it. Had the man been assigned to watch her and had he been listening outside? Carol's worries increased. She knew, of course, about the stickup and murder of the night before. She pondered the idea that perhaps Mrs. Millard would never be permitted to auction off her precious diamond. Ledoux was aware of her intentions. Perhaps he might exert his diabolical powers to steal the diamond, hoping Mrs. Millard might then raise more money in some other fashion. Carol picked up the telephone in her room and asked that Butch be sent to meet her in front of the big house.

He arrived promptly, serene and unaware that he was under observation. Carol led him into the middle of a large cleared area where nobody could approach without being seen.

"Things are developing," she told him. "First of all, they're suspicious of us. I saw one man trailing you a little while ago. Also a Mrs. Millard is going to auction off a big diamond tonight and give the money to Ledoux. As I see it, they may try to steal that diamond."

"To heck with the diamond," Butch looked around. "I'd like to spot the guy tailing me."

"Never mind him. They believe you're going into town to cash a check for me. But get in touch with Tony or Silk, tell them about this Mrs. Millard and her Regal diamond. Have a wad of cash when you return and hand it to me openly. Get back as soon as you can."

"Okay," Butch replied, "I found out there's a bus every half an hour about a mile down the road. Won't take me long. Did Ledoux read your mind yet?"

"I don't know," Carol Baldwin's voice was grave. "Butch, whatever you do, remember that Ledoux is no ordinary man. We're handing a serious, dangerous proposition, and we might not win. Now get going."

Butch had one more bit of information. "I prowled around the barracks where I live. It's a funny thing but these guys who act as gardeners and attendants—all keep guns in their rooms. A regular arsenal of 'em. See you later, Carol."

Butch made town in somewhat more than an hour. He phoned Tony Quinn's law office and later met Silk Kirby at a designated corner. There Butch explained the whole thing.

"You and Carol are on the wrong track," Silk objected. "Why should Ledoux swipe something he is going to get anyhow?"

Butch scratched the back of his neck. "You got me there, Silk, but Carol seems to think if Ledoux swiped the diamond, the dame who owns it would come through with still more cash."

"Maybe," Silk granted, "I brought money for that check you are supposed to cash. I'll tell Mr. Quinn about Carol's message and, for the love of Mike, Butch watch yourself. This is no picnic."

"It will be for me when those monkeys start something." Butch grinned broadly. "I'm ready any time they are."

Butch O'Leary returned to the palatial estate, walked from the bus line and was admitted instantly. As he strolled up the sloping path, two men in white coats stepped from behind shrubs and matched their steps with him. A pair of guns pressed against Butch's ribs.

"Just keep on walking," one of them warned. "You're a big fellow, but we can cut you down to a pygmy by just pressing a trigger. One false move will be fatal. That's a warning. Now move."

BUTCH made no show of resistance. He had been neatly caught. They marched him to his own room and there he was promptly tied up, scientifically, so that he couldn't budge a muscle. A gag was slapped between his lips and he was left alone.

Carol didn't see Butch return for an excellent reason. Not long after he departed, one of the attendants came with a message that Ledoux wanted to see her and begin the treatments. She accompanied the man to the first floor, along a corridor that led to the back of the house. The attendant stopped before a closed door,

"Mr. Ledoux is in there," he said. "Please walk right in."

Carol felt a wave of panic come over her. Whether it was because she had to face Ledoux or it was just premonition, she didn't know, but it was impossible to back out now. She opened the door and looked into a room as dark as a dungeon.

As she turned, the attendant put the flat of his hand against her back and gave her a hard shove.

Carol went hurtling into the darkened room and the door slammed shut behind her. She tripped and fell headlong, but was on her feet in a second, prepared to face almost any danger that might

materialize out of the gloom. She ran to the door and banged on it.

"Listen," the attendant warned, "if you raise a rumpus you'll be muffled, understand. We don't want to get rough with you, so pipe down. And next time don't pretend you're a rich girl looking for help from Mr. Ledoux. We did some checking by telegraph and found out the person you claim to be just doesn't exist."

She heard his footsteps retreating. Carol fumbled in her purse, took out a pack of matches and lighted one. No luxury was present here. There was just a small cot and a clothes closet which was empty. She sat down on the edge of the cot and began to worry.

CHAPTER X
Visit from the D.A.

HARVEY VERNE was in his office that same afternoon when his secretary entered and said Tony Quinn wanted to see him. Verne blinked a couple of times, unwound stubby legs from his chair and got up.

"By all means, send him in," he said loudly, as if he hoped his voice would carry into the reception room. "Then see that we are not disturbed, please."

Quinn came in, led by Silk who helped him into a chair and then discreetly left the room.

"It's a pleasure," Verne assured Quinn. "I know you have been appointed an assistant district attorney. Papers are full of it, welcoming you back where you belong, I suppose. I remember well what a great D.A. you were before—that is—"

"Before I became blind," Quinn finished quietly. "I'm not sensitive about my blindness. A man gets used to those things after a few years. I came to see you about that affair last night. I'm conducting part of the investigation. Another man died, you know. That makes two murders."

"Ghostly thing," Verne shuddered. "They took my wallet and it was well filled too. Ripped it right out of my pocket. Ask me anything you wish. I'd give a right arm to help land those crooks."

"You were in the thick of it," Quinn said. "Just before the lights went out, who was near you?"

"Why, I can't say for sure. Lloyd Aubrey had just left me. We had a little talk about some business we are both interested in. Aubrey got it good. Darn near fractured his skull, I hear. I didn't notice who else was near me. The show was too good."

"And you have no idea as to who got your wallet?"

"Not the faintest idea," Verne shrugged. "It was black as pitch. Somebody encircled my throat with an arm, grabbed my wallet and beat it. Folks started screaming and milling about. How could those crooks have got their loot out of there? It must have made a sizeable bundle and it was not on the premises when the police arrived."

"It seems a puzzle," Quinn said grimly. "I'm sorry you can't help. No one seems to have paid much attention to his neighbors when it happened. If you think of anything that may help, please telephone me."

"I hope for an inspiration," Verne arose again, "I'll help you out of the office."

Silk took over in the reception room. He led Quinn back to his car parked in front of the building and then drove straight to the home of Lloyd Aubrey, another victim who had suffered much more than Verne.

Aubrey was lying on a davenport when Quinn and Silk were shown in. His head was heavily bandaged and one arm was in a sling.

"Greetings to the new assistant district attorney," he said. "I'm pretty much of a wreck. Have you made any headway on that horrible affair last night?"

"Little, if any." Quinn sat down, aided by Silk who again withdrew. "That's why I'm here. Were you hurt badly, Mr. Aubrey?"

Aubrey pointed toward his bandaged head and then shrugged. "Sounds like a silly question because I look much as a mummy does. Forgot you couldn't—ah—see. Yes, I really got quite a beating. Concussion and near fracture. Wrenched arm and a multitude of bruises. Besides, I lost plenty of cash. Those crooks were certainly thorough."

"They told me you were unconscious when I arrived at the scene last night. I thought they'd taken you to a hospital,"

"Not I," Aubrey chuckled. "I hate 'em. Don't like the smell of hospitals. Soon after they shoved me into the ambulance, I woke up, and had them take me home instead, Foolish thing to do, I guess. Because my doctor simply called another ambulance and sent me to the hospital anyhow, for X-ray."

"Have you any idea who hit you? " Quinn asked.

"I think several of them pounced on me," Aubrey answered. "At any rate, it felt as though I was slugged a dozen or more times. May I ask if you have any suspects in mind?"

Quinn stared slightly to the left of his host, with those blank, unseeing eyes.

"I'm going to be frank," he said, "I know you are one of the many financial backers of a man named Jules Ledoux. I also know what this man Ledoux professes to be. Now one of his students, or disciples was mixed up in a strange

jewelry theft case. In fact, he is now under arrest and I'm to prosecute him."

AUBREY'S expression became more intent and he leaned forward slightly.

"Go on," he urged, "I think I know what you're getting at."

"Good. That makes it easier," Quinn said, "Young Barlow is the lad in question. Now I've learned that last night more of Jules Ledoux's disciples were present at the affair. In your honest opinion, do you think they may have had something to do with the robbery?"

"1 don't know," Aubrey replied. "Anyone there could have been guilty."

"Then let me put it this way. Do you believe Jules Ledoux could, by will power and thought waves, compel anyone to commit crimes such as those?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Aubrey said seriously. "Jules Ledoux is an above average man. He thinks on a higher scale. He has reached a level not yet attained by any of us here in the Occident. If he were a criminal Mr. Quinn, believe me, he could arrange the robbery of the biggest bank in New York, without fear of consequences."

Quinn gave a long sigh, "I just thought I'd ask. After his arrest young Barlow claims he didn't even know he was in the jewelry store. He says he woke as if from a sleep. That's what made me wonder about Ledoux. I'm going to have a hard time convicting Barlow."

"You'll never do it," Aubrey predicted. "In the first place, he isn't the criminal type. Know what I think? Barlow had been studying under Ledoux much too hard. He'd been practicing the blanking out of the mind and went into one of those spells just before the theft."

Quinn nodded, "I guess I'm going to lose my first case all right. However, I always like to give the underdog a break. Barlow deserves one, I suppose."

"Whether he does or not, you won't be able to gain a conviction," Lloyd Aubrey reiterated.

"Just the same," Quinn said, "I'm going to try my darndest. Thanks for trying to help, Mr. Aubrey."

"I wish I could have helped more," Aubrey said, "One thing I ask—don't persecute Jules Ledoux, That man is a benefit to the world. I believe in him. I've backed him and I shall continue to do so. Others believe in him too. They are turning over large sums to aid him in his worthy cause."

"Meaning Harvey Verne, perhaps?" Quinn asked.

"I'm mentioning no names," Aubrey said. Thinking Quinn was blind, he made no effort to conceal a look on his face which indicated Quinn had struck home with that name.

Quinn called to Silk Kirby, was helped up and out of the house.

Aubrey shook hands with him at the door, wished him luck and stood there while Quinn tapped his way down the path and into the car.

As the car pulled away, Silk twisted his head to look in back.

"How did you find Aubrey, sir?" Silk asked Tony Quinn.

Quinn sat with his cane between his knees, leaning on it heavily and his face clouded in deep thought.

"Aubrey was badly injured," he said. "I could see stitches on the back of his scalp and bruises on his wrists, neck and face. They really gave him a going over."

"Not like Harvey Verne," Silk commented. "For a guy who was mugged and robbed, he got off pretty easy. I wonder how come they didn't floor him with those blackjacks? And also, why were there so many blackjacks when only six of Ledoux's young students were present?"

"They may have carried two or more apiece. Perhaps they threw them to the floor to confuse the police regarding the number of crooks involved. Drive home, Silk. I'm becoming more worried about Carol and Butch. They should be phoning in about an hour."

"Yes, sir," he responded. "Will you attend Mrs. Millard's little party tonight?"

"I will," Quinn said tartly. "If Carol thought enough of her hunch to send Butch to tip us off, then it's worth investigating. I can wangle an invitation easily and if any of Ledoux's youngsters are around, we can expect trouble."

"Only this time we'll be prepared for it," Silk commented.

"We certainly shall, Silk. If those smooth, society brand hoodlums pull another job I'll issue a warrant for the whole gang and put Ledoux where he belongs."

CHAPTER XI

Young Man Without Memory

MRS. MILLARD'S elaborate town house was the scene of a gathering of a select group that evening. They came to bid and buy, for her diamond was a world-famous stone and had no bad luck omens adhering to its history.

Mrs. Millard moved about enjoying herself hugely. She jabbered about the benefits of Jules Ledoux's training and how she hoped the final bid would be high enough to finance the

mystic for a long time to come. She shook hands with Quinn, murmured some vague greeting and went on her way again.

Quinn and Silk, immaculately dressed in tuxedos, kept somewhat aloof from the others. Cocktails were being served and Quinn saw young Barlow coming his way with a tray of them.

"Will you have one?" Barlow asked. "Oh, I forgot, you can't see. I'm Barlow, Mr. Quinn. Your first customer, remember? I'd like to make a little bet you don't slap me in the cooler."

Quinn assailed, "I don't think we should bet on anything like that, Barlow. Just hope you will be acquitted. If you aren't guilty, I hope so, too."

Barlow moved the tray so that Quinn's extended hand touched one of the cocktail glasses. Quinn picked it up. Silk made no effort to take one.

"At least," Barlow said, "I'm grateful you're in charge. I should be scared, I suppose, because of your reputation. But you're honest, Mr. Quinn, and won't take unfair advantage. And I've got some pretty good lawyers, too."

"Good luck." Quinn raised his glass. "To you, Barlow. Confusion to the wicked."

Barlow laughed and moved away offering drinks to others. Over the rim of his glass, Quinn saw two more of Ledux's disciples enter the room. Two who had been in attendance at the murder affair the night before.

"Silk," Quinn said, softly, "we'll maneuver to keep at least one of those men close to us every moment. Especially if they drift toward the spot where the diamond is to be auctioned."

The formalities over, the business of the evening began. Lloyd Aubrey, a handsome man even with his head and arm bandaged, made the first bid. Harvey Verne raised his short body on tiptoe to shout a higher price and the battle for the diamond was on.

Mrs. Millard acted as the auctioneer and kept begging for higher offers. They came, for that stone was precious. Verne dropped out after two bids, but Aubrey kept raising the ante higher and higher. It was plain that he meant to have the stone.

Young Barlow moved out of the room, carrying the empty tray. Quinn saw the other two young men gradually work their way closer and closer toward Mrs. Millard who was standing on a footstool and holding the diamond on a chain, high so the facets created a galaxy of sparkling light through the room.

She was clever enough to have arranged the lighting. Except for one lamp which was directed straight at the stone, only mild illumination filled the room.

Quinn was ready when it happened. The lights went out all over the house. Mrs. Millard screamed, stopped and then screamed again with a genuine note of terror. That scream was cut off.

Quinn, who didn't need to adjust his eyes when the lights went out, saw easily through the darkness. One young man had leaped behind Mrs. Millard and was belaboring her with a blackjack. He wasn't pulling the blows and his thin, pale face was wreathed in savage, murderous lines. The other young man pushed his way to a point where he faced Mrs. Millard. It was simple for him to reach up, grasp the stone by its platinum chain and yank it free of her grasp.

The man with the blackjack drew back his weapon to administer a killing blow, but at that instant Tony Quinn became the Black Bat without hood or regalia. In the utter darkness he felt secure from detection and was in his element.

Leaving Silk's side, he plowed through the crowd, reached Mrs. Millard in time to give her a hard shove that sent her off the foot stool and crashing to the floor. The blackjack missed with plenty of margin.

The young man with the stone was moving toward the back of the room and Quinn went after him. He saw Barlow emerge from the curtains, heard him give a sibilant hiss and the thief moved in that direction. So did the Black Bat.

The thief was going to hand the stone over to Barlow for disposition. But the thief had to go by the sound of Barlow's hiss to locate him.

THE BLACK BAT moved between the two, gave Barlow a violent thrust backwards and then touched the thief on the arm. Instantly, the diamond was thrust blindly toward him and the Black Bat took it.

He dropped the gem into his pocket, took three long strides after the thief who had immediately turned away and grabbed him by the collar. The young man gave a squeal of alarm. The Black Bat whirled him around. He wasn't wasting time now. At any second the lights might go on. He smashed a powerful right punch to the thief's jaw and connected. The young man sailed backwards on rubbery legs and crashed to the floor.

The Black Bat then ripped the platinum chain from the diamond and thrust it between the thief's fingers. He was back at Silk Kirby's side long before the lights went on.

For a second or two, men and women just stared at one another, accustoming their eyes to the glare. Then someone saw Mrs. Millard and someone else spotted the young thief on the floor, still gripping the empty platinum chain.

Quinn raised his voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am Tony Quinn, an assistant district attorney. All of you men and women are supposed to be

trustworthy but none of you must leave these premises. See to Mrs. Millard. Get a doctor if she is badly hurt. My man can take charge of that chap who, I am told, is unconscious on the floor with the chain of Mrs. Millard's diamond in his hand. Silk, get him."

Silk Kirby needed no second invitation. He leaped over to where the young man lay, hoisted him up and threw him onto a davenport. He mounted guard over him.

"Mr. Aubrey," Quinn called out. "Mr. Aubrey, I was told you are present. Please step over beside me."

Aubrey obeyed. "Incredible," he said. "That thief is young Billy Webb. You know his parents, Quinn?"

"Yes, yes," Quinn said impatiently. "Go to the nearest telephone and call Police Headquarters, Ask Captain McGrath to come here with a squad. And Aubrey—have him bring a blank warrant."

Aubrey hurried away. Harvey Verne, somewhat pale, walked up to Quinn and took his arm.

"I'll be your guide, Mr. Quinn. Thank heavens somebody like you was in attendance. Mrs. Millard has a split scalp, but that's all. A miracle she wasn't murdered. But I can't get over young Webb being a thief."

"Take me to him," Quinn ordered. "Quickly please."

Billy Webb was recovering from the effects of the punch as Quinn approached. He sat up, scowled and tried to arise. Silk gave him a shove back onto the divan.

"None of that," Silk warned, "or I'll plaster your fancy mug."

Billy Webb rubbed his eyes and saw, with considerable awe, that he held a platinum chain in his hands. He let go of the thing as if it were red hot. He passed a hand over his face.

"I—don't seem to understand what happened," he groaned. "I was struck. I think I was struck."

"That egg on your jaw didn't come from any imaginary sock," Silk put in. "All right, Mr. Quinn. He can talk now."

Verne hurried away to bring a chair and helped Quinn into it. Webb stared at the apparently blind man. His eyes seemed to be as dead as Quinn's.

"I'm an assistant district attorney, Webb," Quinn said. "As such I have the authority to place you under arrest for attempted murder and robbery. What have you to say?"

"Attempted murder?" Webb talked in the same strange monotone as the two men who had attacked the Black Bat on Jules Ledoux's estate. "Robbery?"

"What's the matter with him?" Quinn raised his head in Silk's general direction.

"He acts dazed, sir. Maybe it was the blow on the chin. The man who dished that out knew how to punch."

"Can't you think lucidly?" Quinn asked Webb.

"I—I—yes, of course I can. I know I'm in Mrs. Millard's home. I've visited the place often with Dad and Mom, but I don't remember coming here. My head feels funny. That chain. Where did I get it?"

"You snatched it out of Mrs. Millard's hand," Verne half shouted in sudden anger. "After you practically beat her to death with a blackjack. Quinn, I'll testify in any court against this scoundrel. There is no question as to his guilt. All you have to find out is whom he passed the diamond to."

GIVING a violent start as if in surprise, Quinn turned toward Verne.

"Isn't it on the chain?" he asked.

"It was torn off, sir," Silk said. "The diamond is missing."

"Then everyone present will have to be searched," Quinn announced firmly. "Including myself and you, Silk. Bend down. I want to give you some instructions about handling this business."

Silk Kirby put his ear close to Quinn's lips.

"The diamond is in my side coat pocket. Right hand side," Quinn whispered. "You used to be a darned good pickpocket. Lift it until after I'm searched and then put it back before they get to you. And don't slip it into McGrath's pocket, even though it may seem like an attractive gesture. I want the stone and no one must know I have it."

Silk straightened up and his hand brushed against Quinn's side. Supple fingers darted into the pocket, palmed the diamond and transferred it to his own pocket. Soon Captain McGrath arrived, with a squad of men.

"The place is covered," he reported to Quinn. "I have a list of everyone present and all are still here. Since the diamond is missing, I'd better start a search."

Quinn arose and offered himself first. Silk stood just behind him.

McGrath himself did the honors and when he was finished, Silk stepped forward. As he did so, the stone was transferred to Quinn's pocket again. The other people were lined up. Matrons escorted the women to another room. When it was over, McGrath expressed his disgust.

"I knew we'd never find it. What's next, Quinn? You'd better work fast before Corday hears about this and messes things up. Do you know he made me assign men to cover practically everyone present at the stickup last night?"

"It doesn't surprise me," Quinn said with a

chuckle. "Lead me to a room where we can be alone."

McGrath did so, closed and locked the door after telling Silk to stand guard.

"Young Barlow is here," Quinn said. "So is Billy Webb and another of Ledoux's clientele. Webb obviously snatched the diamond and he's either putting on the dazed act, like Barlow did, or he really is under the influence of a mind stronger than his own. I don't pretend to know which."

"So that's why he's acting so odd," McGrath grunted. "Sure, it's exactly the way Barlow behaved. But, Quinn, this Webb fellow comes from a pretty important family. If we make a pinch, you'd better have the stuff to convict him."

"His possession of the chain and his incredible story should be enough," Quinn snapped. "Have him locked up—without bail! Mrs. Millard may develop dangerous symptoms and the charge may eventually be murder. Just be sure Webb doesn't get out."

"And then?" McGrath asked. "Do we go after his nibs, Ledoux?"

"If you brought along that warrant, sit down and fill it out with the name of Jules Ledoux," Quinn commanded. "Since Ledoux lives out of your jurisdiction, we'll pick up some state police and put him under arrest."

McGrath seemed worried. "I don't like to say this, Quinn, but do you think there is enough to hold him? Corday hates you and he'd like to see me lose my badge. Ledoux has some powerful backers."

"Agreed," Quinn said. "But two of Ledoux's students are implicated in crimes, and maintain they had no memory of what happened, Therefore we can assume Ledoux might hold some power of will over them. That's sufficient evidence for us to take action on."

"You're right." McGrath shoved his hat to the back of his head and teetered slowly on the balls of his feet. "By the way, Quinn, you just don't happen to know a lot more than you're telling, do you? I mean, you haven't, by any chance, gone out in a black hood to investigate this case."

"Quit being foolish," Quinn grinned at him. "Let's go after Ledoux and see if he can make us jump through hoops."

As they emerged from the room, Harvey Verne was standing directly in front of the door with a puzzled expression on his face that cleared when he saw Quinn and McGrath. He turned and walked away without a word. Handcuffs were snapped over Billy Webb's wrists. Young Barlow and the other Ledoux disciples watched this with bulging eyes.

Quinn wished he could reveal what he had seen in the darkness, but that was, of course, impossible unless he wished to reveal himself as the Black Bat. Barlow was a crook. So were all of those youths who had studied under Ledoux. There was another worry in the back of Quinn's mind too. It concerned Carol and Butch.

A few minutes later, Silk Kirby was driving Quinn's car toward the city line with Quinn and McGrath in the back seat. A squad of state police were to meet them two miles from Ledoux's estate.

CHAPTER XII
Menace of the Witch Doll

QUINN felt a quiver of apprehension when he saw that the big gates at the entrance to the estate were wide open. A harried, disheveled David Hoffman met them on the porch.

"I don't know what happened," he said. 'Mr. Ledoux left here a short time ago. He said he wasn't certain when he would be back. Now I find all the help is gone, too."

"Lieutenant, search the premises," Quinn said. "Bring in everyone to me. Never mind their protests."

The State Police lieutenant saluted, dispatched his men and entered the house himself. Quinn, who was leaning on McGrath's arm, turned his head toward Hoffman.

"I'm afraid you'll have to consider yourself under technical arrest, Mr. Hoffman," he said, "You know more about Ledoux's affaire than anyone else. We may need you as a witness."

"But what has Ledoux done?" Hoffman begged. "He's no criminal. Ask anyone who ever attended this place as a patient or a student. They swear by him. Any large sums of money in Ledoux's possession were freely donated to him and he can prove it."

"I'll tell you certain facts, Mr. Hoffman," Quinn said. "It happens to be those young men attendants of Ledoux's who interest us most. Barlow, as you know, is now awaiting trial for stealing a valuable necklace. Tonight Billy Webb almost killed a woman, stole a diamond and was caught red-handed. Or almost red-handed. We haven't found the diamond yet, but he had the chain of it in his hand."

"Incredible," Hoffman declared, "But Mr. Ledoux doesn't profess to make honest men out of crooks, you know."

"I'm thinking he makes crooks out of honest men," McGrath snapped.

"And I agree," Quinn added. "You see, Hoffman, in each ease these young men insist they were in a mental fog at the time of the crime. We think that mental haziness may have been caused

by Ledoux and that he directed them to perform these acts of robbery by means of his will. He claims he can control other men's minds."

"But never to commit a crime," Hoffman groaned. "Never. I've known Ledoux for years. He's an honest man."

"We'll soon find out," McGrath said. "Have you any idea where he went? Did he take a car?"

"Yes. His own car and one of our newest patients went with him. A pretty blonde girl. I've forgotten her name, but she was attended by a chauffeur, brute of a man. He accompanied them."

"McGrath," Quinn said. "Take care of Hoffman, Watch him. Silk, escort me around this establishment. I want to visit every room, talk to the patients, investigate the servants' quarters. Sometimes a blind man can smell and hear and sense things better than a man with healthy eyes."

Inside the house, the patients were being assembled, but Quinn passed them up for the present. Silk led him, methodically, to all the rooms on the first floor. Once they were away from the others, Quinn closed his eyes tightly.

"I meant what I told McGrath. If Carol had a ghost of a chance, she left a clue. I want to go back to the days when I was really blind. Use other senses. You'll know why, if what I hope is true."

Silk reached the room in which Carol had been held a prisoner. As he opened the door, Quinn gave a curt nod.

"This is it. She was in here. I can smell the perfume she used. It's distinctive. Stand by the door and don't turn on the light I'll prowl in the dark."

Quinn entered, surveyed the room as easily as though every light was on and—saw nothing. He went to the clothes closet and flung this door wide. His eyes swept the bare interior and stopped abruptly. There was a narrow bit of thin paper sticking from behind one clothes hook in the furthest corner.

A detective, like McGrath for instance, would have missed the flimsy thing, for Carol had purposely placed it so only Tony Quinn would find it. Quinn discovered it was tissue paper. He unfolded it carefully. There was a brief message, written in lipstick, on the underside.

FINDER BRING TO ASS'T D.A. QUINN.
B. AND I BEING TAKEN TO FARMHOUSE TWO MILES EAST OF HERE, HEARD THAT MUCH. LEDOUX IS CROOK.

Below was a postscript

WILL TRY TO LEAVE LIPSTICK TRAIL. HURRY!

BUT Quinn didn't refold the paper. Instead he placed it, full length, between the pages of a notebook in his pocket,

"They've got Carol and Butch," he told Silk Kirby. "She left a hidden note and addressed it to me, as Quinn, D.A. That means she must have agreed with Butch to pretend they are detectives whom I assigned to the case. Smart of her, as usual. Gives Ledoux no suspicion they are agents of the Black Bat."

"Let's go after them," Silk suggested.

"No, not yet. We're on ticklish ground at the moment. Haste might bring on disaster and I doubt Carol or Butch are in danger. If Ledoux did snatch them, he wanted them alive. Crooks on the lam don't take along useless baggage."

"But we mustn't wait too long," Silk pleaded. "Sooner or later, they'll be killed. Butch and I sometimes had arguments, but I'd sure miss that big, stupid lug. And you know how I feel about Carol, We can't waste time."

"You also know how I feel about Carol—and Butch, too," Quinn countered. "I'm trying to judge this coolly and we can't give the game away yet. Take me back to McGrath."

They found the tough detective captain questioning patients and getting the same reply from them all. They defended Ledoux and scoffed at the idea that he was a crook.

"We're getting no place fast," McGrath groaned. "Quinn, Ledoux took a powder all right. He packed two big suitcases before he scrammed. Somebody got word to him and I'll lay a big bet it was either Barlow or that other young punk with him. Shall I send out an alarm for Ledoux?"

"Yes," Quinn said. "A still alarm. No radio broadcasts. Ledoux may not know we're on his trail. He might slip up somewhere along the line. I'm going home. It's in your hands now. A blind man can't be of much help in conducting a search."

"I'll take care of it," McGrath said. "You know, it's pretty nice working with you again. Sometimes I wouldn't mind if you were a certain party who gets my goat now and then."

"From you, Captain, that is a decided compliment," Quinn bowed. "The best of luck. Take me home, Silk, and let me brood on how helpless a blind man can be."

As he entered the car, Quinn stumbled and landed on one knee on the running board. Silk quickly helped him up.

"Did you slip, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"No, I didn't slip," Quinn put the palm of his hand against his forehead. "Things just started to spin. Guess I must be tired. Get going, Silk. We have a great deal of work to do."

When they arrived home, Quinn went immediately to the hidden laboratory. He threw his cane

onto a chair, took the lipstick-written note from his pocket and smoothened it on a glass plate. He picked up a magnifying glass and studied it intently.

HE WAS still engrossed in the note when Silk entered.

"Look here," Quinn said. "Through the glass. Notice that the upper part of the note is quite badly smudged where the lipstick came into contact with opposite sides of the paper when it was folded. Yet the P. S. is hardly smudged at all."

"Yes?" Silk questioned. "What does it mean?"

"Carol did not write the postscript. It's easy to forge handwriting done in lipstick. The note was discovered, grasped rather hard and the lipstick smudged. Then the P.S. was added and the note carefully replaced. Carol knew she was being taken to some farmhouse about two miles east of the estate. She did not write that she intended to leave a lipstick trail. It would be impossible anyhow. They went by auto. But I'll bet we can find such a trail just the same, left by the crooks to draw us into a trap."

"I've been in 'em before," Silk said stolidly. "If we can grab one of the gang, he'll talk. I know ways, sir. Not Butch's kind, but I promise you anybody we nab will sing."

Quinn nodded. "Get out my clothes. The Black Bat is going to take wing again. I intend to—"

A tiny red light near the secret door started to blink. It meant that someone was approaching the front door.

"See who it is," Quinn said. "I'll be in the study. If I can't get away, you excuse yourself, slip out the back and enter the lab. Take a gun. Put on one of those disguises you wear so effectively and look for that lipstick trail. Remember, it is a trap. I'll be along as soon as I can get free."

Silk Kirby answered the door when the bell rang. He bowed respectfully. Lloyd Aubrey's head was still bandaged. Aubrey's companion, Harvey Verne, who seemed even smaller beside Aubrey's tall, erect figure, returned the nod.

Kirby took their hats and coats, escorted them to the study and prepared some drinks. He served these and then discretely made his way out of the room. If Aubrey or Verne were listening, they could have heard Silk proceeding up the stairway to the second floor. But they wouldn't have heard him coming down again or slipping out a rear exit.

Quinn restrained an urge to get rid of these two men as quickly as possible. No matter how long they stayed, he had to see it through. Ledoux might have important aides. He might even be dominated by someone else. One of these men could possibly be that someone else.

"Gentlemen," Quinn raised his glass, "to your health. And what brings you here so late?"

"We know you're hunting for Jules Ledoux," Aubrey explained.

"Captain McGrath returned to Mrs. Millard's house and Verne accidentally overheard him phoning in a report to Headquarters."

"So?" Quinn prompted,

"We came here to apologize. Mind you, we don't believe Ledoux is guilty of anything, but—if he is—we'll do all in our power to put him behind bars. He could be the most terrible criminal in history, Quinn. There are no limits to his amazing powers."

"I have a pretty clear idea," Quinn retorted. "And it isn't a case of could be. He is a criminal. Otherwise, he would never have fled from the castle on the hill. I believe you two misjudged him from the start, but that isn't to your dishonor. Ledoux fooled almost everyone he met. Perhaps by the use of will power and telepathy, I don't know. He is remarkable and that makes him all the more dangerous. Have you any idea where he might have gone?"

"No," Verne replied quickly, before Aubrey could answer. "We came to offer our help and it seems we haven't any to offer."

Quinn wished they'd call it a night and go. There was Carol to think of—and Butch. Silk too, who would soon be deliberately trying to spring a trap. Quinn wanted to be on his way—as the Black Bat.

CHAPTER XIII
Three Suspects

LEDOUX had spoken of having a place not far from the castle, Verne told Tony Quinn. "A quiet spot where he could go and think and develop his strange powers," Verne said. "He wouldn't reveal where this place was though."

Aubrey drained his glass and set it down carefully. "I'm worried about those young men," he said. "Webb, for instance, is under arrest at your orders. I don't blame you for that, but suppose Webb, and Barlow too, were under the evil influence of Ledoux's mind. Suppose they committed crimes not of their own volition, but by telepathic orders? Could they, under the law, be held guilty of such crimes?"

Quinn smiled. "There has hardly been a precedent for such a case. Personally I doubt whether a jury would convict, but I assure you I shall try to send the defendants to jail. I wonder what happened to the diamond. All Webb had was the chain and the stone is certainly not hidden anywhere in that house."

"The diamond doesn't concern me now," Verne said. "We're interested in Ledoux."

"As a district attorney the diamond concerns me," Quinn said. "It's evidence. Suppose we have another drink, gentlemen, and call it a night."

Quinn arose, thrust his cane forward at an angle and moved between the pieces of furniture without touching them. Suddenly he stopped and steadied himself with one hand against a high-backed chair.

"Are you all right?" Verne half arose.

"Quite," Quinn answered. "A bit dizzy. Must be the excitement. Please don't arise. A blind man must shift for himself. I know where the ingredients are and can mix a good drink."

Quinn made his way to a small bar, poured the drinks, added sparkling water and stirred them. He placed all three on a tray and walked steadily back. He was a bit clumsy in serving, but Aubrey and Verne cooperated readily. They relaxed again, finished the drink, talked some more about Ledoux and, at last, took their leave.

Quinn went to the front door with them, shook hands and stood in the doorway as they walked down to the street. Then he closed the door, reeled to the nearest chair and all but fell into it. His head was splitting, the dizziness had increased several times.

The spell went away after a few seconds and Quinn went back to his chair in the study. He bided his time rather impatiently, but he always made it a point to remain on hand for a certain length of time after the departure of visitors. If any ever returned, he'd still be around to greet them,

As he sat there, eyes closed, he began thinking deeply of the case and of his own strange predicament.

Aubrey and Verne were dominant characters among his list of suspects. Quinn worked on the idea that perhaps Ledoux did not have quite the power he professed to exhibit and that somewhere in the background was the real crook, this shadowy figure, always in the background, may or may not have worked with Ledoux. There was organization, true. Someone who directed and planned these robberies. They were undoubtedly only the first of a series, with bigger ones to come. Quinn meant to stop that.

Aubrey and Verne had both donated heavily to Ledoux. They were present at the scene of the crimes and either one could have filled the role of a leader of crooks. Both men were reputed to be wealthy, but Quinn also realized that a reputation for wealth and the actual owning of it were two different things. Perhaps one or both of them, were trying to recoup losses by a fast method—crime,

Then there was David Hoffman to think about. As Ledoux's manager he was in position to work with him, or take advantage of situations. Furthermore, Hoffman had been almost too eager to help and yet he'd contributed nothing. Being constantly at the castle on the hill, where those young disciples had trained, he knew them well—perhaps even dominated them. It was possible that he had learned Ledoux's secrets of power and was using them.

But most of all, this recent ailment troubled Quinn. Nevertheless, he decided he could risk entering the lab and getting into the paraphernalia of the Black Bat now. He locked up the house first and extinguished all lights to give the impression that he had retired. Then he entered the workroom, found the photograph of the doll dressed as the Black Bat and studied it intently.

The cord twisted around the head was indication that the curse would affect the head and brain of the victim. The dizziness and aching skull he possessed could certainly be caused by this witch doll—if he permitted himself to believe in it.

That was serious enough, but if it wasn't true and if the doll meant nothing and his dizziness was caused by a drug, then whoever was behind these crimes must have known the identity of the Black Bat to administer the drug. If Quinn allowed himself to believe in the charm, he was in deadly danger. If he refused to believe in it, then he had to consider the fact that his dual identity was known. Neither assumption gave him much comfort.

Another of the dizzy spells made it seem almost unsafe to venture out. He had to sit down and study his spinning brain. This was getting worse. He forced thoughts of his own troubles out of his mind and dwelled once more on the case.

He considered Ledoux as the genius behind it all, Ledoux, with power to compel, especially trained young men, to perform acts of violence for his financial benefit. Acts which they, themselves, were not aware of until the spell wore off.

The stickup at the big party had been neatly arranged. The stolen gems and money had been cleverly slipped out of the place and right under the noses of many guards. The affair at Mrs. Millard's was much more simple. Young Webb's dazed condition, after being trapped, could have been faked, but if so he acted the part well.

What puzzled Quinn, however, was Ledoux's reason for executing this robbery by remote control. Since Mrs. Millard meant to turn over the proceeds of the diamond to Ledoux, why would he have stolen the thing? At an auction, far more money would be raised than through a fence.

If, however, Ledoux believed Mrs. Millard would convert something else into cash and he would have both the diamond and her donation, then it would make sense. But how could Quinn be

sure? Then too, if that were a fact, why had Ledoux ordered those young men to be so ruthless in stealing the gem.

Through the darkness, Quinn had watched them strike down the aging dowager with murderous blows. Ledoux would be killing the goose and stopping his supply of golden eggs.

More and more Quinn believed there was someone else behind this. That man was either Hoffman, Aubrey or Verne. It was even possible two of them were co-operating.

Quinn arose, found his head much better and stripped off his clothes. He donned the black outfit of the Black Bat, tucked the hood into his pocket and noticed that another of these hoods was missing. Silk Kirby must have taken it. He might have been too worried to spend the necessary time over a disguise.

Quinn drew on the wide-brimmed hat which hid his features fairly well, went out through the tunnel and reached the coupé parked on the side street. Silk, he already knew, must have taken one of the cars in the garage and coasted to the street so Quinn's visitors wouldn't hear the motor.

The Black Bat headed for Ledoux's castle. He had to make a quick turn onto dark side streets twice and stop the car in a hurry because of those dizzy spells. They were coming with greater intensity. More than an hour after Silk left, the Black Bat finally rolled past Ledoux's estate without stopping and went on to search for the trail purposely blazed by the captors of Carol and Butch.

CHAPTER XIV

The Screaming Lure

DURING all this time, Silk Kirby had been busy. He drove two miles east of Ledoux's estate, concealed his car and continued on foot. The section was sparsely settled and he could see the lights of only one place, set far back from the road. Silk Kirby approached the lane which led up to this house, saw a large metal mail box and examined it. There was a streak of lipstick forming a crude arrow which pointed toward that house.

Silk grimaced. Ledoux was getting childish. A trail like this was too obvious—too impossible. Given any opportunity Carol Baldwin would have been far more subtle but her kidnappers, of course, knew little about her character. Possibly they believed a girl might be that clumsy.

At any rate, Silk knew the trap was set and baited. He only wanted to learn whether or not the bait was Carol and Butch. If so, he meant to try and evade the trap, rescue them and get clear. If they were not there, then someone was bound to be and Silk wasn't inclined to be tender about prying information out of any prisoner he might take.

Silk drew the Black Bat's hood down over his face, took an automatic from his pocket and started moving toward the house. He kept to the tall grass which surrounded the place and made an easy approach. There was a clearing though, a closely clipped lawn extending about twenty feet all around the house.

He crossed this, crouched and ran as fast and silently as possible. Nothing happened, no one called out a challenge. Silk flattened himself against the wall of the house and paused to regain his breath.

Then he sidled toward the nearest window. The room within was illuminated, and the shades were not drawn. Silk risked a quick glance. The room was not occupied. Its furniture was of modest quality, but what drew Silk's attention immediately were two familiar objects, Carol's large black purse lay on a table beside a chauffeur's uniform cap of such size as to belong to no one except Butch.

Silk Kirby ducked back out of sight. The objects were too prominently displayed. The cheese on a mouse trap couldn't be more obvious and yet they indicated that the two prisoners might be inside, Silk looked again. The door leading into the room was tightly shut.

He checked the window and found the latch in place. Grimly now, Silk visited other windows and they were all locked. Some rooms were illuminated, some dark, but wherever he could see the doors, they were closed. Silk went around to the front and softly climbed the porch steps.

Suddenly the almost eerie silence was cut by a scream. It came from inside the house and—it was Carol. There was no question about that, and Silk's blood ran cold. He started for the door as the scream ended on a high, wavering note. His hand grasped the knob and at that instant he recalled Quinn's warning about not walking into a trap. They wanted him to enter the house.

Silk vaulted the porch railing easily, dropped down in the midst of a cluster of lilac bushes and stayed there. He hoped that someone might emerge to see what was keeping him. He prayed this would happen because Silk meant to seize whoever came out and force him to tell what nature of a trap was set.

Everything was quiet again. The insects, and even a few hundred frogs in some pond behind the house, were in action again. Silk still had to restrain that almost overwhelming urge to get inside and find out why Carol had screamed. One of Silk's talents was patience and he waited. About five or eight minutes went by and the scream came again.

Silk kept his head. The scream was meant to draw him inside. He wasn't going to fall for it although his heart ached for Carol. The scream ended just as before, on that high wavering note. It was so similar that Silk frowned and wondered how that could possibly happen. It lasted exactly as long too.

Finally Silk decided to force the hand of whoever was inside. He found a large, round stone, drew back and hurled it at one of the windows. The crash of glass was followed by a reverberating roar. Pieces of the house went sailing skyward and the whole front of the place caved in.

Silk's horror was abruptly broken when he saw someone rise up and begin to run madly away. It was a short man, stocky and he was coming in Silk Kirby's general direction. Although Silk didn't get a perfect look at him, he thought it was David Hoffman, Ledoux's manager.

HOFFMAN didn't mean much at the moment. Silk was far more worried about what had happened to Carol and Butch. He rushed toward the wrecked house, through the cloud of dust the explosion had set up and began looking for victims. He turned over broken parts of the house until his hands were sore, cut and full of slivers. He found nothing to indicate the house had been occupied.

Silk was still engaged in this task when he saw a long shadow fall across a pile of debris directly in front of him. With a half savage cry of rage, he whirled around, reaching for his gun as he did so. Silk relaxed however. It was the Black Bat.

"They were in here," Silk groaned. "I saw Carol's purse and Butch's cap. I heard Carol scream. They had the house rigged to blow up if the windows were opened or broken or, I suppose, the doors touched."

"I heard those screams, too," the Black Bat said. "Both of them. My ears are better than yours. Those two screams were identical. I saw you throw the rock, but also I was watching Hoffman. He seemed fully as surprised as you were when the house blew up."

"Do you mean that Carol and Butch never were in the house?" Silk gasped.

"Precisely. The two screams must have come from a recording on an automatic phonograph. They were recordings of Carol screaming, but only once. Look for part of a broken record or phonograph. I-I'm afraid I can't help at the moment."

The Black Bat sat down abruptly and clamped both hands to his temples.

"It's that witch doll again." Silk cried in horror. "It's getting worse. That means whoever is torturing you has twisted the cord a little tighter."

"Never mind me," the Black Bat said weakly. "Dig up that recording and the machine. The explosion will draw people here. We haven't much time."

Silk Kirby found what he was looking for quickly, once he knew what it was. He showed the Black Bat the bits of record and parts of the machine.

The Black Bat arose, steadied himself and took Silk's arm. "I knew you'd find them. It had to be that, Carol and Butch were taken somewhere else. Silk, if you were Ledoux or a crook connected with his establishment, where would you go when in a spot like this? With the roads watched, the few cars out being stopped? The only real hiding place sacrificed to create a trap for whoever came to rescue Carol and Butch?"

"Back to the castle," Silk declared promptly. "Why not? It's already been searched. The police would hardly expect them to come back. The place is empty. The patients have left for town."

"Then what's keeping us?" the Black Bat said. "We're going there too. Better use my car and leave the one you drove hidden where it is. You can recover it later. I don't want Tony Quinn's marker plates flashed all over the section."

Kirby drove the coupé as the Black Bat had suggested. It didn't take long to cover the two miles back to Ledoux's vast estate, but during the ride, the Black Bat sat with his head thrown back and resting against the cushions.

"Are you all right, sir?" Silk asked in a worried voice.

'Yea, yes, I can make it. The headache has subsided but that dizziness seems to have increased. And now my throat is dry and seems to be constricting."

"They've twisted another cord around—the neck of the doll," Silk said promptly. "You can't laugh those things off, sir. You know it works with you whether you believe in it or not."

"Pull in just this side of Ledoux's gate," the Black Bat ordered. "Don't touch the gate if it's closed. The whole business is wired and charged with electricity."

Silk Kirby's foot came off the accelerator. "I just thought of something, sir. When you approached this estate the first time, Ledoux knew you were coming. You thought about him and your thought waves reached him. What if that happens again?"

"We'll take the chance," the Black Bat said grimly. "Ah, the big gates aren't closed. No police about either, which is excellent. Stop the car, Silk."

They got out. The Black Bat swayed a little for the first few steps, but steadied himself and reassured Silk who stayed very close in case his dizzy companion should topple over.

"We'll go through the gate, plunge into the shrub-filled area and make our way to the back of the house," he said. "Something there interests me."

AFTER passing through it, the Black Bat closed the gate. Shortly after, in the inky darkness, he picked out a small brick house without windows and only a narrow door which was closed.

"That's it," he said. "I knew it must be there."

"I don't see a thing," Silk Kirby complained.

"Sorry, I forgot your eyes aren't like mine. It's a small brick house and I'll give odds there's a dynamo inside. It controls the juice that flows through the fence. Let's find out."

The Black Bat forced the door with his keys, they stepped in and Silk remained to watch and guard the entrance while the Black Bat used his uncanny vision to study the layout.

"Silk," he called, "come here. Close the door and light a match. There are no windows so you'll be quite safe. I want to show you something. There—hold the match higher. Notice these two switches? One sends a lethal current through the entire fence. The other sends only a mild current which is interrupted when the fence is touched. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"I'm afraid—not, sir."

"It's simple. One of my greatest mysteries in this case was the way Ledoux read my mind when I first visited this place. He sent Hoffman out to call me. Now suppose someone phoned Ledoux that I was probably on my way, and young Barlow, for instance could have guessed I'd interview Ledoux. Well I climbed over the fence, received no shock, but set off the silent alarm system which told Ledoux I'd arrived. The rest was easy. He knew why I came and merely pretended to read my mind."

"But that brings him down to earth," Silk said. "It makes him a fake and everything else he's done can't be reduced to such simplicity, sir."

"It can. Some of it, at least. I'll grant Ledoux has powers, but not as powerful as he pretends. And I was afraid he might read my mind and find me thinking against my will, that my real identity was Tony Quinn. I can laugh at it now. I couldn't then."

"I hope that's true," Silk was still not convinced. "Do you think he murdered that boy Ronnie Raynor?"

"If he's the only criminal head of this outfit, yes. Ronnie was murdered because he knew too much. He refused to obey and went on studying things Ledoux didn't want him to know. Dervish whirling, for example. It also proves something else, something far more important than any other development so far."

"You'll have to explain, sir," Silk said. "I can't just exactly follow your line of reasoning."

"Ronnie Raynor became intensely interested in this business. He went beyond the line and the criminal behind this affair was afraid Ronnie might grow too powerful or learn too much. That is proof our criminal actually believes in this stuff. He had to murder Ronnie before he became too powerful. Dervish whirling, precognition—the ability to glimpse events yet to come—other extra-sensory phenomena, are all derived from constant study and practice. Ronnie was too good a student and died for his pains."

SILK shrugged in the darkness. "All right. The criminal believes in this hocus-pocus. What makes that so important?"

"You'll find out why. At the moment we have Carol and Butch to consider. Let's slip into the big house and have a look."

They were at the door when the intense darkness of the confined area in the little house was suddenly broken by the steady flashing of a blue lamp.

"I left the juice off," the Black Bat said. "That's the signal someone has touched the fence or the gate. We're going to have company."

CHAPTER XV

The Waning Power

RAPIDLY the Black Bat and Silk Kirby scurried out of the power house. Further along the path they crouched down behind a bush and waited. Two men were approaching. The Black Bat saw through the darkness and recognized them.

"It's young Barlow and that other chap, the one who nearly killed Mrs. Millard. His name is Kean. Quiet now."

The two men walked briskly and were talking in low tones which the Black Bat's ears picked up easily.

"For the fiftieth time I tell you Webb never handed me that diamond," said Barlow. "He came close enough to do it, but he gave me a shove instead. Maybe you know something you don't want to tell."

"Don't be an idiot," Kean snapped angrily. "I was taking care of that old dame. I've hated her ever since I was a kid. Always butting in, always snitching on me to my old man. After I felt Webb yank the diamond out of her hand. I took a good swing at the old dame, missed and scooted away. When the lights went on, I wanted to have an alibi."

"Well, where is the rock?" Barlow asked. "I haven't got it. You never laid a hand on it. Webb couldn't have had the thing because he was searched and so was the whole house. The police certainly pulled the place all to pieces."

"I think we'd better ask a certain party," Kean said ominously. "That's what we came here for, isn't It? And if we were double-crossed, so help me, I'll turn the rat over to the cops. This stunt isn't working out too well, anyhow."

They ran up the porch steps and used a key to open the front door. Not far behind them came the Black Bat and Silk Kirby. After gaining admittance by means of a skeleton key, they could hear Webb and Kean mounting a flight of steps. The Black Bat signaled Silk to remain downstairs while he followed the pair.

Moving much more softly than Silk could have done, the Black Bat quickly caught up with the two men and watched them go to the top floor and enter a room. He returned, called Silk and together they went to this same room. Both had drawn guns. It was time for a showdown.

The Black Bat opened the door silently, threw it wide and stared into the room barren of furniture or anything else. There were just four walls. He stepped inside, showing no surprise. He put the gun away, removed his gloves, and started to pass his hands lightly over the four walls. He soon found what he knew must be there. A door had been skillfully built into the wall. A visual examination would never have indicated where the secret panel was, but the Black Bat's fingertips were highly sensitive, another development of his long months of real blindness.

He found the means to open that door, too. The panel slid back silently. There was a narrow flight of steps leading down. The Black Bat blocked Silk's way for a second and dropped his voice to a faint whisper.

"Remember this, Barlow and Kean must get away. That's of the utmost importance. Keep that hood on, but try not to show yourself alongside of me. There will be two Black Bats. I wish Captain McGrath was here to experience that."

Taking the lead, the Black Bat slowly descended the steps, testing each one and peering through the darkness for any signs of a warning system. Halfway down the flight, the Black Bat stopped abruptly and leaned against the wall. Silk knew what it was. That dizziness had returned and Silk's heart pounded in anxiety. That magic of the witch doll was working. Sooner or later it would grow worse until the Black Bat couldn't stand it. Then he would die. Silk made a mental oath personally to throttle the man who had created that doll.

In two minutes the Black Bat continued on, slowly, and weaving a bit now and then. They both had guns ready. At the bottom of the steps they discovered they were on the second floor, in a narrow wing built behind the real one. Both of them recalled that some of the rooms on the second floor did not have windows. This was the reason.

The rooms in this hidden section were narrow, hardly more than cells. Some of the doors were open, some closed. The Black Bat pressed an ear against the first closed door. He reached out and gripped Silk's shoulder. Silk stepped back, his gun leveled.

The Black Bat turned the knob carefully, got the door open an inch and waited. Nothing happened and it was pitch dark inside. He opened the door wider.

"Carol," he whispered. "Butch!"

SILK KIRBY gasped. They both hurried into the room. Carol Baldwin and Butch O'Leary were there, securely and painfully tied, gagged and blindfolded. Silk darted past the Black Bat, took a knife out of his pocket and cut them free. He helped Carol up. Butch scrambled to his feet and emitted a low growl of rage.

"Quiet." The Black Bat closed the door. "Some of these men are in the house and we intend to nail them. Give me a quick idea of what happened to you."

Carol said, in a voice gone hoarse because of a dry throat from the gag, "They took us like Eisenhower took Sicily. I adopted a phony name and address to put over the idea I was an heiress. Ledoux merely checked, found no such person existed and—well, we were pretty neatly taken."

"The note written in lipstick?" the Black Bat asked.

"It worried me more than anything else. When they took me out—and every attendant at this place is a crook—one of them saw the note in the closet. I watched them use my lipstick to add a postscript and they told me they'd soon find out whom I worked for."

"We told 'em we were special detectives, hired by Quinn, the D. A.," Butch added. "Just let me lay

my mitts on that guy Ledoux, that's all I ask. The poor sap didn't show himself. I suppose he hoped we wouldn't get wise he is the big shot."

"We'll get him," the Black Bat said grimly. "Only don't be too sure he is the leader of this group. Here is the set-up. We're in a secret part of the big house. The gang is somewhere else. Our job is to grab as many as possible except for two young fellows, Barlow and Kean. Two of those who were in the group Ledoux especially trained. I want them to escape. Is that clear?"

"Whatever you say," Butch nodded. "Only let's get at 'em. They twisted Carol's wrist until I figured they busted it."

"And they made a recording of your scream," the Black Bat said. "Silk, stay with Carol until Butch and I start things humming. Then both of you can sail in."

The Black Bat and Butch slipped out of the room and down the corridor. Silk Kirby took Carol Baldwin's arm and spoke softly.

"Don't get the idea this is the end of it," he said. "I've never been so worried in my life. The Black Bat received a photograph of a witch doll with a cord tied around its head. Ever since, he's been suffering from dizzy spells and headaches. He won't believe a witch doll can kill folks."

Carol gasped. "It sounds incredible, Silk. Even if there isn't a witch doll curse and Tony somehow has been drugged, that still puts us in great danger."

"I know," Silk groaned.

"If someone has drugged the Black Bat, the crooks must know he is Tony Quinn. That's deadly serious, Silk!"

Silk slowly drew his gun. "Maybe," he said, "a little treatment with some steel right between the eyes would keep them nice and quiet. I'm no killer, but to protect Quinn and us, I'd cheerfully let these rats have it."

"No, not that, Silk. Tony would give the order if he believed it necessary. We'd better get out of here. The fireworks are about due to begin any minute."

There was a tremendous crash from somewhere down the corridor. It was followed by twin howls of pain and more banging noises. There was no shooting and the racket died away quickly enough.

"Butch," Silk Kirby said grimly, "in action."

A door crashed through as only Butch could smash it. Running feet grew fainter and fainter. Butch was obviously chasing someone. Silk Kirby and Carol Baldwin remained where they were. Silk still wore the Black Bat's hood and he didn't want to give the impression there were two Black Bats. Such .a thing was bound to raise doubts and renewed activity on the part of Captain McGrath if he ever found out. Silk couldn't remove the hood and expose his features. That would be a dead giveaway and he silently cursed the fact that he hadn't taken time to put on a disguise.

Footsteps approached, the door opened and the Black Bat looked in.

"It's quite safe now," he said. "The two young scamps got away as I planned. Butch floored two of the attendants and I knocked another pair silly. Ledoux escaped from another room and Butch is after him."

"Can we come out then?" Silk asked.

"Yes. Look for some rope and help me tie up these attendants before they recover consciousness. Don't let them see you."

IT REQUIRED only a few moments to accomplish this job. The attendants were securely trussed and locked in individual secret rooms. The Black Bat showed them the way back to the third floor and soon they were downstairs. At a signal from the Black Bat, Carol and Silk quickly withdrew into a nearby room, out of sight.

Through a door opened only a crack, Carol and Silk saw Butch stride into the immense reception hall. He held Ledoux by the nape of the neck, his feet off the floor and kicking wildly. Ledoux had both eyes tightly shut.

"What's the matter with him?" the Black Bat asked.

Butch grinned. "He ain't giving me no phony eye. I tossed him around a little and told him if he opened his eyes and looked at me, I'd close both of 'em so they'd stay shut a long time."

"Put him down," the Black Bat ordered. "All right, Ledoux. You can open your eyes. I'm not afraid of these powers you possess." Butch put the man down and Ledoux opened his eyes slowly. He gulped and backed away a step or two until Butch gave him a shove forward.

"Black Bat," Ledoux gasped. "Thank heavens you came. I—wait! You, think I'm behind all this. I'm not. I swear it. There is someone else. I don't know who, but those men who worked for me here, also worked for another man and took his orders above mine. They seized me hours ago. I was put into a car and driven off. Then they blindfolded me and I don't know what happened after that."

"Boy, is he a rotten liar," Butch grunted.

"Go ahead, Ledoux," the Black Bat said. "What else?"

"Finally they took me back here. There were secret rooms on the second floor. I knew about them. Whoever owned this place before, constructed them, but I never knew why. They tied me up. Hours passed. Then I heard a lot of commotion. Someone came in, cut me loose and said if I ran for it, I might escape with my life. Naturally... I ran."

"But not half fast enough, huh?" Butch became sarcastic. "You sure were clocking a few miles when I caught you."

"Tie him up," the Black Bat said. "Do a good job. Affix a gag and a blindfold, Ledoux, you will be turned over to the police. If they believe your story, that's nothing to me. Frankly, I think you'd better confess."

Ledoux whirled and made one half-hearted attempt to get past Butch. A powerful fist clipped Ledoux alongside the jaw and he dropped. Butch grinned and went to work tying him up.

Suddenly the Black Bat whirled around and headed for the door,

"Someone coming," he said.

He was on the porch when David Hoffman, Ledoux's manager appeared. Hoffman stared into the wrong end of a gun that looked like a yawning howitzer to him.

"How—how do you do," he said a little uncertainly.

"Hoffman, what were you doing near that house when the explosion occurred?" the Black Bat asked, somewhat harshly.

Hoffman gulped, "I-I was looking for Mr. Ledoux. He-he owned the house and I-I thought he might be there."

"Next time, you'd better call the police when you are hunting a criminal," the Black Bat said. "I'll give you one chance to redeem yourself, Go into town and stay at a centrally located hotel until you are called by the authorities. Make it the Hotel Loyale. If you don't obey or if you try to escape, I'll find you if it takes ten years. You can get started now."

"Th-thanks," Hoffman started to turn away. He was trembling badly.

"Wait a minute," the Black Bat said. "You need a drink. I'll bring you one. Ledoux seems to have quite a bar inside. Stay on the porch."

Two minutes later Hoffman tossed off a highball in two swallows, handed back the glass and without a word, turned and bolted. His short legs worked like a piston on a fast driven pump as he departed.

Carol Baldwin drove Silk Kirby back to the blasted farmhouse, let him off and Silk drove Quinn's car back to town. Carol, in turn, took the cheap coupé to the side street near Quinn's home, entered the lab through the tunnel and waited.

Meanwhile, Butch O'Leary appropriated a sedan from the garage behind the big house. Ledoux was stowed into the back seat with the Black Bat. Butch drove to Captain McGrath's residence, carried Ledoux to McGrath's porch and laid him down gently. He scrawled a note, tucked it beneath the ropes that bound the self-proclaimed mystic and hurried back to the car.

The note read:

HERE IS LEDOUX. DON'T LET HIM GIVE THE FISH-EYE AGAIN.

It was signed with a black sticker cut in the form of a bat with wings outspread. The trademark of the Black Bat.

"Now we go home?" Butch asked.

"Not quite yet," the Black Bat said. "Drive around until you find a small toy store in a quiet neighborhood."

BUTCH O'LEARY spent the better part of an hour finding such a store. He stopped the car at the curb. The Black Bat got out, disappeared down an alley and returned, after ten minutes, with three dolls in his arms. Butch gaped at him.

"A neat little burglary." the Black Bat chuckled. "I needed these dolls and couldn't wait until morning to buy them. But I put some money on the counter in payment. Home, Butch."

Silk and Carol were waiting. The Black Bat removed his hood and became Tony Quinn. With Carol's help, they fashioned some new clothing for the dolls. With paint and a fine brush, Quinn carefully created new features on the dolls, dressed them and when he was finished, they looked very much like David Hoffman, Lloyd Aubrey and Harvey Verne. Next he procured some large pins and stuck them into the midriff of each doll. Finally he set them, individually before a camera and took a picture of each.

It was still lacking two or three hours of dawn when he quickly dried the prints made from these pictures, handing them with thin rubber gloves. He inserted them into plain envelopes.

"Carol, take this photograph and shove it under David Hoffman's door at the Hotel Loyale. Wake him up when that is done, but don't let him see you. Butch, you deliver this picture to Aubrey in the same manner and Silk, Verne is the one you will handle. After that, go home and get some rest. There won't be any new developments until morning."

"Tony!" Carol stepped close to him. "Silk told me about that—witch doll. I've watched you. There is something wrong."

"It's my head," Quinn told her. "Don't worry—nothing I can't cure. Run along now. Our three suspects must have these pictures, the Black Bat's own brand of witch doll, as quickly as possible."

Carol left by way of the tunnel. Quinn sat down weakly when the lab was cleared. He closed both eyes and steadied his spinning senses until he could arise, walk to a white tiled bench and take from a sterile kit, a hypodermic needle. He carefully injected the needle into a vein and drew out a sample of blood.

CHAPTER XVI
Confession of Guilt

BEFORE Tony Quinn bad a chance to go to his office the next morning, a car pulled up. Young Barlow and Kean, another of Ledoux's disciples, walked briskly to the door. Silk Kirby let them in.

"Who is it?" Quinn looked off-side a bit from the spot where they were standing. His eyes were those of a totally blind man.

"It's Barlow, sir. I've come here with a friend of mine named Kean. We've a confession to make and we'd rather make it to you than to anyone else."

"Sit down," Quinn said. "Please remember, I make no offers to temporize any punishment you deserve. However, I shall listen with an open mind."

"That's all we ask," Kean said, "Tell him, Barlow. Tell him what kind of chumps we were. We and the others."

Barlow wetted his lips nervously. "I—don't quite know how to begin. You see, there were quite a number of us at first. We joined Jules Ledoux's cult. Soon some of us believed in him and accepted his teachings. The others simply quit. Ledoux trained us specially. We were to be his disciples."

"And he taught you crime," the Black Bat said. "Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

"No, sir, his teachings were really sincere. We learned to obey him, first of all. Then he trained our minds to go blank and receive messages he sent. Planned telepathy, we called it. Pretty soon it got so that Ledoux could get into contact with us at any time. We took our orders that way. More weeks went by. He made us trained athletes. We obeyed his orders to leap from a trapeze while it was swinging. We learned that when he commanded us to freeze, we couldn't disobey him and we remained frozen into whatever position we had assumed until he let us go—mentally."

Tony Quinn nodded, "I heard about the exhibition he gave. It rather proves your statements. Go on."

"Well, there isn't so much more. We couldn't fight Ledoux's mental orders. When they came, we had to obey. I—guess I did steal that necklace from the jewelry store. But when I did it, my mind and volition were not my own. We—the boys who studied under Ledoux—think we also had something to do with that horrible affair at the war bond party and at Mrs. Millard's. I know I didn't want to attend the auction, but I went anyway because Ledoux commanded me to."

Quinn leaned back in his chair. "That's an amazing revelation. You see, I've suspected this and I have checked up on you and the others who formed your little clique. Oddly enough you all come from a cultured family, but just as oddly, not one of you has kept clear of trouble. Four of your group were not even taken by the draft for certain reasons. The others also wangled their way out, somehow. Every one of you has been a potential criminal, in my estimation.

"Your parents could do nothing with you. Even the large sums they gave you were not sufficient. However, your story agrees with other information we have. It may be that Ledoux deliberately selected you. I'll help all I can."

"Then you don't believe we'll be sent to prison?" Barlow asked. "After all, we didn't actually commit those crimes. Not of our own free will, Ledoux committed them through us."

Quinn arose. "If you are telling the truth, I doubt if any court would convict you. However, I shall take steps to have the other boys rounded up at once and held. Meanwhile, I want you to do me a favor."

"Anything," both young men cried.

"Good. Ledoux has influential financial backers. If they provide lawyers and money, Ledoux can fight the charge, and we may lose. That means all of you will probably go to prison."

"How can we help?" Kean asked quickly. "The disgrace would kill our mothers, sir."

"You should have thought of that before you joined Ledoux. However, I want you boys to come with me and visit three men. I want you to convince them that Ledoux is a dangerous person. That his will power compelled you to turn to crime. Then Ledoux will have no one to fall back on. He'll be convicted and you boys—well, it may even be they'll let you go."

"Take us to them," Barlow offered. "Well do anything, Mr. Quinn. So will the others who are mixed up in this."

QUINN turned his head and called out to his helper.

"Silk," he shouted. "Get the car out front. We'll stop at my office first. I'll be there only a moment and then we'll visit David Hoffman, Lloyd Aubrey and Harvey Verne. This time, I think, they'll realize what manner of man they have been backing."

Silk and Quinn left the two young men in the car parked outside Quinn's office building.

"They won't run away," Quinn's voice was harsh. "They're too sure their smug plan is working and to insure it they need our help. They'll get it—straight into a cell where they belong."

Silk Kirby shook his head from side to side. "I still don't understand. I couldn't sleep all night from worry. Why did you send pictures of those witch dolls you prepared to Hoffman, Verne and Aubrey? Have you changed your mind? Do you believe in those things now?"

"I never did, Silk," Quinn replied. "Last night, after you and the others left, I tested my own blood. It was full of an alkaloid of the belladonna group. A drug that induces dizziness and headaches. The influence of the witch doll that is supposed to have had its effect on me was made in a modern laboratory."

"You were drugged?" Silk almost came to a dead halt. "But then, sir, someone must know that you are—the Black Bat. That's the person the witch doll was supposed to injure."

"I know that," Quinn said. "It troubles me, I'm almost afraid to go through with this business. If my double identity is known, I'll be in the next cell to our super crook and murderer. Yet, we don't dare let him go free."

Silk deftly turned Quinn so he faced his office door. Silk opened it. They greeted the employees and went on into Quinn's private office. A stack of mail was on the desk.

Quinn sat down slowly. "If this comes to pass, Silk, I'll give you, Carol and Butch an opportunity to get out from under. You see, the drug couldn't have been administered to me while I was the Black Bat. It must have been given me when I was posing as a blind man. Therefore, the murderer must know me and I'm at a loss to figure out the next step."

"I'll stick," Silk vowed, "Let's see some crook swear you're not blind and that you are the Black Bat. I'll perjure my head off to show him up as a liar."

"It's no use," Quinn groaned. "What's more, we can't delay. I have one little ace in the hole. Not to help us out of this mess, but to trap the murderer. A neat but expensive trump card."

Quinn flipped Mrs. Millard's diamond into the air and caught it deftly. Then he tackled his pile of mail. Silk just sat and stared, hardly able to believe they were trapped in a web of their own making. The man whom the Black Bat was ready to expose could, in turn, reveal the identity of the Black Bat and crush all further activities of the crime fighter and his aides.

Suddenly Quinn jumped up and seized his cane. He stuffed an envelope into his pocket.

"Let's go, Silk, and stop worrying. We're in the clear. I'll tell you about it later."

Leaning on Silk Kirby's arm, Tony Quinn returned to his car. The two nervous young men were waiting impatiently. Silk drove first to David Hoffman's hotel room. Hoffman was in bed, somewhat pale and obviously ill. Kean and Barlow halted near him.

"It's my stomach," he complained, "Nervousness, I guess, although the doctor doesn't know what caused it, Tell me—is Ledoux all right? He hasn't been harmed?"

"Not yet," Quinn said. "But if he's guilty, there will be more than one murder charge against him. I merely came to have you identify these two young men as students of Ledoux's." He nodded toward Kean and Barlow.

"Yes, both of them were Ledoux's students," said Hoffman.

"Then we won't stay any longer," Quinn said, "By the way, I'm not a doctor, but there is a simple remedy for the ache in your stomach, A little sodium bicarb. Try it."

The next stop was at Harvey Verne's home. He was wrapped in a blanket while seated in a big chair in his living room. There was a bottle of medicine at his elbow.

"Well?" he said curtly. "What now? I'm a sick man."

"I'm sorry," Quinn replied. "I merely wanted you to hear the story these two young men have to tell. As a financial backer of Jules Ledoux, you should know the truth."

VERNE listened and grew wide-eyed. "So Ledoux is a crook and a killer. Using me as a tool, was he? He will get no more help. Prove these charges and I'll add one of my own. Obtaining money under false pretenses."

"Thank you," Quinn said. "And for that stomach ache, I suggest sodium bicarb. An old fashioned remedy, but I'll lay odds it does the trick."

They left Verne's house and drove to the imposing residence of Lloyd Aubrey. A servant admitted them. Aubrey was seated at the dining room table, eating a late breakfast. He was eating cold cereal out of a wooden bowl with a wooden spoon. Quinn noticed this instantly, although his lifeless-looking eyes never flickered. "I want Barlow and Kean to tell you a story," Quinn said after a moment.

"About Ledoux's real purpose in gaining power of his will over others. Ledoux is under arrest. These young men will testify against him and I want you to be convinced that you backed a crook and a killer."

Kean did the talking this time and Barlow corroborated what he said.

Aubrey wiped his lips and muttered a curse. "I'm through," he said. "I'll never back another faker. A man can be a fool once and I've just passed through my foolish period. Send him to the chair, Quinn. That's where he belongs."

Quinn was standing at the back of the room, near an ornamental cabinet with many small drawers, He turned away from this and the crook of his cane caught on the handle of one drawer. The whole cabinet toppled over, its drawers disgorging all manner of things.

"Boys," Quinn said, "will you please help me pick these things up? I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Aubrey.

A blind man has so many accidents. No, please finish eating your breakfast. Well remedy the trouble I've caused."

Kean and Barlow were eager to please the district attorney who would probably handle their case. They began scooping up the articles which had been thrown to the floor.

Suddenly Barlow gave vent to a wild, savage oath and straightened up. Between his fingers was Mrs. Millard's diamond.

"You rotten double-crosser!" he screamed and advanced toward Aubrey. "Accusing us of keeping it when you had it all the time. You took it that night. You held out on us."

"Silence, you idiot!" Aubrey yelled and arose. As he did so, he doubled up in pain for a second. But when he recovered, he started a wild dash toward the hallway. Silk made an unsuccessful attempt to intercept him. Aubrey grabbed a coat from a rack, fumbled in the pocket and began to draw a gun.

Tony Quinn, meanwhile, was advancing toward Aubrey, but blindly and hesitatingly. His cane was half raised. Suddenly it began to swing, in a long, wide arc. He held it by the tip and the heavy handle became a formidable weapon. Silk was too busy to help. He'd collared Barlow and Kean.

Aubrey started to raise the gun, saw that cane sweeping toward him and tried to duck.

The cane altered its course a trifle and crashed against Aubrey's head. He went down and stayed on the floor.

"I hit someone," Quinn called out in a quavering voice. "Who was it? What's wrong here? What was the trouble? Someone raced by me. I knew there was danger so I waved my cane. It hit someone. Silk, answer."

"Eveything's all right," Silk said. "It seems Mr. Aubrey was more than Ledoux's backer. He was using him. These boys are talking. They're sore because Aubrey made them steal Mrs. Millard's diamond and then took it away from them and pretended they were holding out on him. There is a telephone almost beside you. No, a little to the left. There, on that table. You'd better call Captain McGrath."

CHAPTER XVII
The Plea Is "Guilty"

EARLY on the day of the hearing the courtroom was crowded. Lined up in the prisoner's pen were Barlow, Kean and the other young men who had turned out to be crooks.

Tony Quinn arose to address the court.

"If your honor pleases, this case needs a great deal of preparation even though all the accused but one, is prepared to plead guilty. It seems Jules Ledoux indicated he could control the wills of others. He wanted young men to practice on and the defendant Lloyd Aubrey thought he saw a chance to create a crime ring beyond any chance of being prosecuted. He assembled these young men, all of whom have unsavory records, though they come from excellent families.

"He sent them to Ledoux where he had influence because he invested cash in this enterprise by backing Ledoux. All these facts will be proven. I make these statements by stipulation with defense attorneys representing the young men. The defendant Aubrey is—ah—not able to be present."

"So I have heard," the judge smiled. "I understand you may be blind, Mr. Quinn, but you can swing a wicked cane. The doctors at the prison ward of the hospital say he won't be fit for two or three days. Go on."

"Thank you," Quinn bowed. "Aubrey's intentions were to have these young men commit crimes from which the profits would be large. The war bond party and Mrs. Millard's auction were examples. In Aubrey's home the police found a list of prospective victims, Aubrey would have netted himself a considerable fortune if his plans worked.

"To get on with it, these young men were to commit the actual crimes. If they were caught, they would appear to be dazed, as if under a spell. They even put on a performance publicly, of Ledoux's mastery of their wills. They did all sorts of tricks, but part of Ledoux's course consisted of intensive physical training and these young men had become athletes. The tricks they did seemed astounding. Actually any good athlete could have done them.

"In that way, your honor, the young men felt they were amply protected. In an emergency they intended to confess that Ledoux dominated them. Ledoux, of course, would vanish and carry on his mental telepathic control from some hidden point. The crime would have continued and no jury would convict a man who turned criminal against his own volition. Especially young men of such good families. That's why they were purposely selected. I think Mr. Ledoux can help us with further explanations."

Ledoux took the stand, "I am a fake," he began. "Almost a complete fake, I can dominate the minds of others, but only under certain conditions and it doesn't always work. With Captain McGrath I was successful because, well, his brain isn't hard to dominate. I accepted wealthy people as clients—patients, if you will. I told them under my mental influence they would feel better and healthier. I told them part of my regime was hard, fatiguing work.

"They went through it gladly and as all of them were inclined toward obesity, laziness, carelessness about what they ate and drank, this course of hard work, sensible eating and drinking did make them feel better. Yes, I took advantage of them. They paid me a great deal, believed in me and I really did help them, but not in the manner they expected."

"You were kidnapped?" Quinn asked.

"I was, by my own staff who were in the pay of Mr. Aubrey."

'You may step down," Quinn said, "1 shall ask moderate bail in your case later on. Now, your honor, I ask that each of these young men be held without bail on charges of murder. I ask a similar disposition of the case of Lloyd Aubrey."

"Granted," the judge snapped. "Tell me, Mr. Quinn. Just how you suspected Aubrey. The police certainly had no idea he was behind such a scheme."

"I realized," Quinn said, "that someone might be using Ledoux. I never believed in the powers he claimed for himself. The night of the war bond party robbery, Aubrey was injured and removed in an ambulance. The loot also mysteriously vanished and I knew someone had taken it out right under the gaze of the many guards around the place. Aubrey was willing to be beaten up effectively by his own men.

"Aubrey, therefore, came under my suspicions. We have arrested the men who rented a private ambulance, arrived at the scene first and removed Aubrey. The loot was in Aubrey's possession and he was not searched. It had to be him or one of the others who was injured. Aubrey happened to be the only man who was associated with Ledoux."

A THRILL of admiration at the astuteness of Tony Quinn ran through the courtroom.

"Good work," the judge approved. "You're the old Tony Quinn. The best district attorney we ever had. I suggest you run for office."

"Thank you," Quinn said. "I became interested in that case when I was appointed by Mr. Corday to prosecute Charles Barlow for the theft of a valuable necklace. I now ask that this particular case be reopened. It is my understanding that Mr. Barlow has a statement to make."

"Case reopened," the judge ordered, "Bring Barlow here."

Silk Kirby leaned close to Quinn while they waited for a bailiff to bring Barlow before the bench.

"What about that diamond?"

Quinn grinned slightly. "Remember we heard Kean and Barlow arguing about it? They were quite put out with Aubrey because he believed they'd held the diamond out on him. They, in turn, suspected the same of him so I tipped the cabinet over, dropped the diamond among the other things and let the boys find it. The witch dolls worked. Hoffman and Verne called in doctors. They didn't believe. Aubrey did, thought a doctor couldn't help and, I'm sure he blamed Barlow and the others for sending the picture of the doll."

"Okay, but what gave you the tipoff it was Aubrey?"

"Quite simple. The man who was behind this obviously believed in the powers of a witch doll. Therefore, I sent all three of our suspects photographs of dolls representing them. In each case the dolls had pins sticking in their stomachs, indicating a pain there. Aubrey did not reveal he felt any pain, because he was afraid to. Yet he suffered all right. I fed Aubrey and Verne enough medicine in some drinks they had at my place to make them good and sick. Nothing serious. Sodium bicarb will cure them."

"I see that too." Silk still frowned. "But you picked out Aubrey of a clear field, except for that business of getting the loot from that theater?'

"I picked Aubrey when I found him eating breakfast with a wooden spoon out of a wooden dish. All those who believe in witchcraft are firmly convinced that once under any kind of an evil spell, they must not touch metal. To do so means death, Aubrey believed it and betrayed himself."

"And what about your own trouble?" Silk said. "Those dizzy spells must have been induced by a drug which Aubrey administered to you. Does he know you're the Black Bat?"

"He hasn't the faintest idea of it," Quinn said softly. "The drug was slow acting and was given to me in a drink at Mrs. Millard's. Barlow handled that. It was given to Tony Quinn and meant for Tony Quinn. The witch doll representing the Black Bat was Aubrey's superstitious gesture. I think he believed it would be effective. You see, Silk, in the morning mail I received this,"

Quinn showed Silk a photograph of another witch doll, dressed and made up as blind Tony Quinn. It also had a cord tied around its head. Silk emitted a great sigh of relief.

"So they now try Tony Quinn because you were pushing the case. Here comes Corday, the D.A."

Corday sat down beside Quinn. "Well," he said with a feeble attempt at open praise, "you certainly went to town. From what seemed to be a mere shoplifting case, you developed a lot of things, including murder."

"Didn't I?" Quinn smiled. "I'm still handling the shoplifting case though. I intend to dispose of' it now. Barlow is taking the stand."

"Maybe," Corday said, "you intend to run for the district attorney's office on the strength of this case."

"You never can tell," Quinn smiled. He arose and tapped his way to the end of the table where he faced the general direction of the witness stand. Young Barlow was seated there.

"Do you wish to make a statement to the court as to your arrest and not guilty plea on a charge of stealing a necklace, Mr. Barlow?"

"Yes," Barlow looked at the floor. "I'm changing my plea. I'm guilty."

Newspaper men who were present, started taking pictures of Quinn. They hadn't forgotten Corday's challenge.

"We'll play this up big," they said. "Quinn, you may be blind, but you see a lot more than other persons with eyes. We're betting you move into the D.A.'s office?'

THE END

THE MAN BEHIND THE BLACK BAT

Norman A. Daniels (1905-95) worked as an insurance investigator after studying at Columbia and Northwestern universities. Born Norman Arthur Danberg in Brooklyn, Connecticut, Daniels made his first professional sale to *Gangster Stories* in 1931, receiving $29.75 for "Vapors of Vengeance."

Daniels' breakout year was 1934, when his output jumped to 400,000 words, including fifteen stories for Harry Donenfeld's *Spicy* pulps. During the following decades, the versatile wordsmith produced tales in a wide variety of genres, including science fiction, horror, detective, adventure, sports and love, selling stories to such diverse publications as *G-Men*, *Thrilling Spy Stories*, *Strange Stories*, *Air War*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and John W. Campbell's *Unknown*.

Working under the "G. Wayman Jones" house name, Daniels created the Black Bat for Standard editor Leo Margulies, and eventually wrote 55 of the 62 Black Bat pulp novels. "Leo asked me to think of something to compete with The Shadow," Daniels explained. "I came up with this character I called the Tiger because in the initial episode, the hero had been doused with acid. His face was lined like a tiger's. He wanted to change the Tiger to the Black Bat because he wanted it to go into *Black Book Detective* magazine."

One of the most prolific writers for the hero pulps, Daniels pounded out dozens of *Phantom Detective* novels, 23 Jerry Wade stories and 15 Crimson Mask novelettes for *Detective Novels*, along with 23 Skipper shorts for *Doc Savage Magazine*.

From 1940-43, he averaged a million words annually, an output only surpassed by Walter B. Gibson's prolific wordage for *The Shadow*. He was aided by his wife Dorothy, who regularly edited and retyped his manuscripts before launching her own writing career.

During 1940 alone, Norman Daniels wrote five Black Bat novels, eight Candid Camera Kid tales, four Masked Detective novels, four Crimson Mask novelettes, three Dan Fowler novels and single adventures of The Skipper and The Eagle, in addition to a variety of non-series stories.

Between 1949 and 1954, Daniels scripted 67 half-hour adventures for the *Nick Carter, Master Detective* radio series.

During the Golden Age of Television, Daniels wrote teleplays for a number of popular television series including *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Zane Grey Theater*, *The Chevron Hall of Stars, Colt .45, The Web, Sugarfoot*, *The Restless Gun* and *The Ford Television Theatre*. —Anthony Tollin

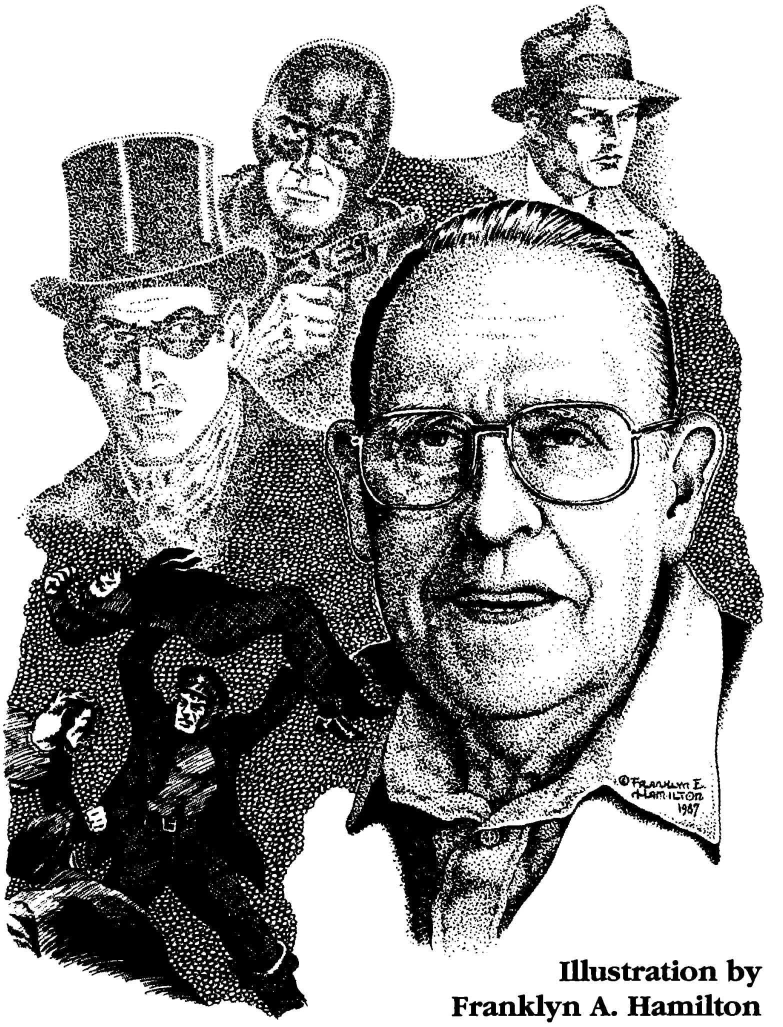


Illustration by Franklyn A. Hamilton

A Golden Age of Comics classic from Volume 1, Number 12 of *Exciting Comics*

illustrated by Kin Platt and inspired by Norman A. Daniels' Black Bat novels

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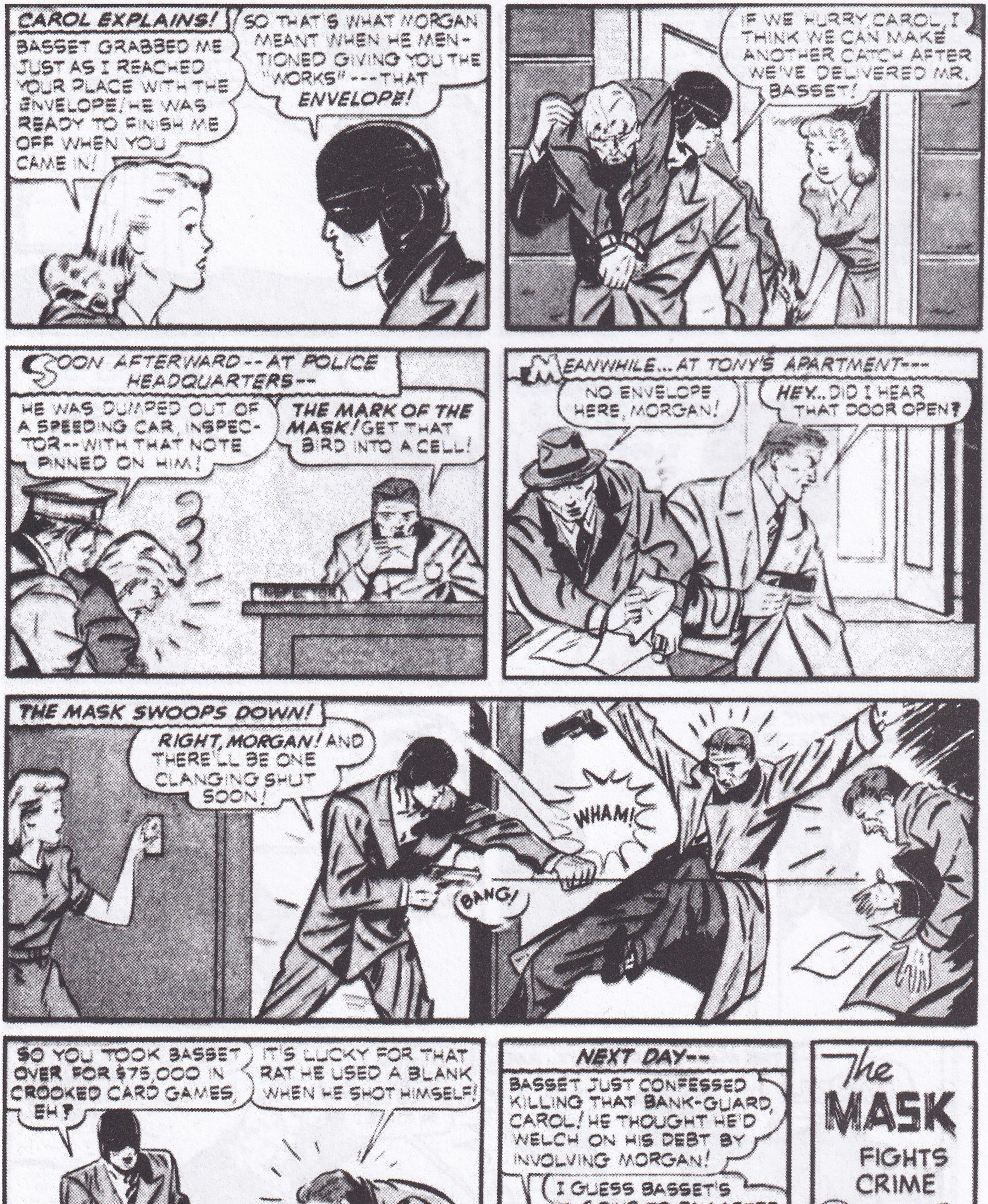


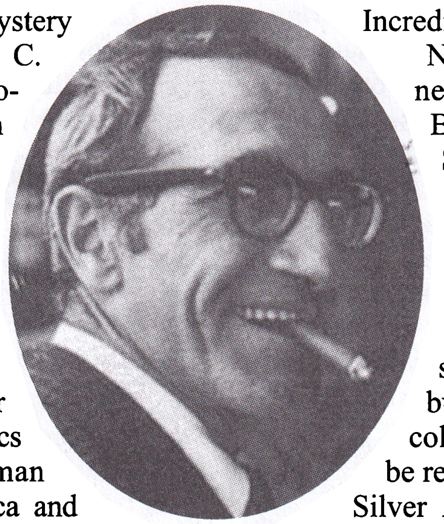
A Golden Age of Comics classic from Volume 1, Number 12 of *Exciting Comics*

OF SUPER MICE AND MEN

KIN PLATT AND THE BIG CHEESE by Anthony Tollin

After achieving their initial popularity in pulp magazines, superheroes exploded onto the American scene in 1938 following Superman's debut as the lead feature of *Action Comics*.

The miraculous success of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's creation led to a plethora of similar mystery men throughout the young comic book industry: Harry Donenfeld's National Comics Publications quickly followed with the Crimson Avenger, Batman, the Sandman, Hourman and a host of other masked mystery men, while its sister company, M. C. Gaines' All-American Comics, introduced the Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman. Victor Fox launched Wonderman and the Blue Beetle, both produced by Will Eisner's comic shop, while Fawcett Publications introduced Captain Marvel, Spy Smasher and Ibis in the pages of *Whiz Comics*. Pulp publisher Martin Goodman's Timely Comics presented Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, the Vision, Captain America and many more. Created the same year the atom was split and the nuclear race began, Siegel and Shuster's Man of Tomorrow had started a veritable chain reaction that jump-started the fledgling comic book field into a major industry.



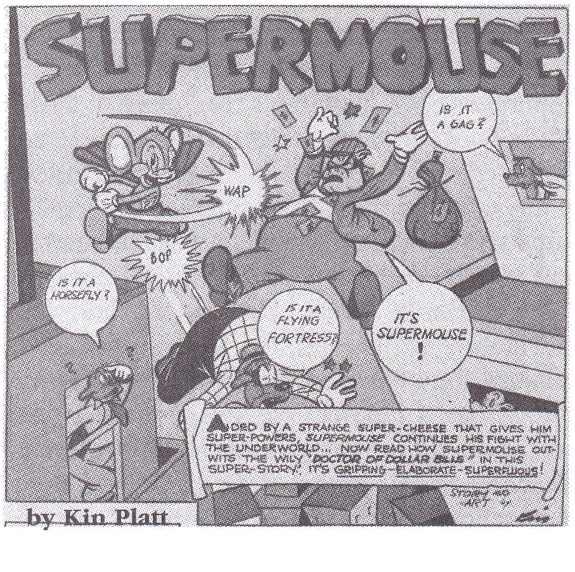
Meanwhile, Ned Pines' Standard Publications adapted four-color versions of many of its established pulp heroes in his Nedor comics line.

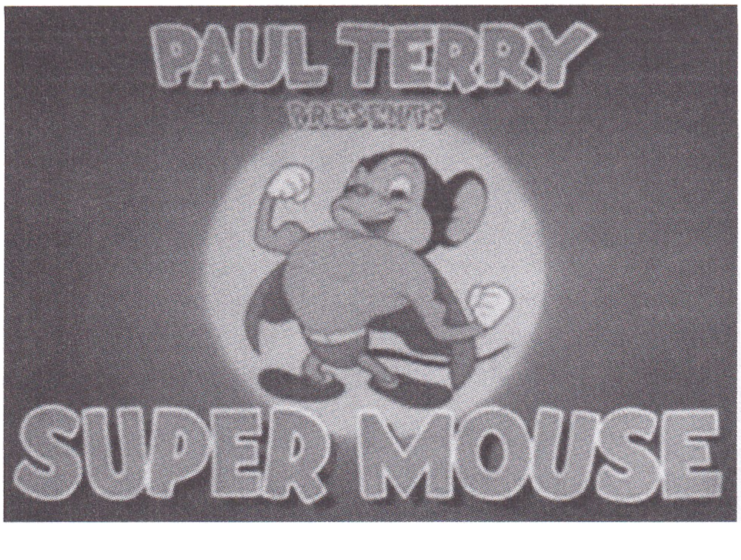
The gentlemen's agreement between Pines and Harry Donenfeld's National comics line averted a potential lawsuit over the similarities between Batman and the Black Bat, which had debuted less than a month apart. Since Pines had agreed that the Black Bat would not be published in comic books, the character was renamed "The Mask" when he debuted in *Exciting Comics* #1. Similarly, Edmond Hamilton's Captain Future arrived in *Exciting Comics* as "Major Mars," while Nedor would soon introduce a totally different Captain Future, created by writer-artist Kin Platt, who received his super-powers from gamma rays (decades before the same radiation transformed Bruce Banner into the Incredible Hulk).

Nedor quickly introduced dozens of new superheroes, including the Black Terror, American Eagle, Doc Strange, the Fighting Yank, Red Mask, the Magnet, Miss Masque, the Scarab and Pyroman, along with four-color versions of Green Ghost and the Phantom Detective.

The Golden Age of comic book superheroes lasted barely a decade, but only a handful of these four-color mystery men would continue to be regularly published in the post-1955 Silver Age of Comics. As the masked crimebusters published by Fawcett, Quality, Fox, Timely and DC's own All-American line fell by the wayside, only Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman continued in their own titles, along with a single non-DC superhero… Nedor's Supermouse!

Created by writer-artist Kin Platt, Supermouse ("the Big Cheese") debuted in the premier issue of *Coo Coo Comics*, which was copyrighted on July 31st, 1942. Less than three months later, another Supermouse appeared on movie screens. Terrytoons' Super Mouse debuted in *The Mouse of Tomorrow,* released to theaters October 16th, 1942. "A bizarre



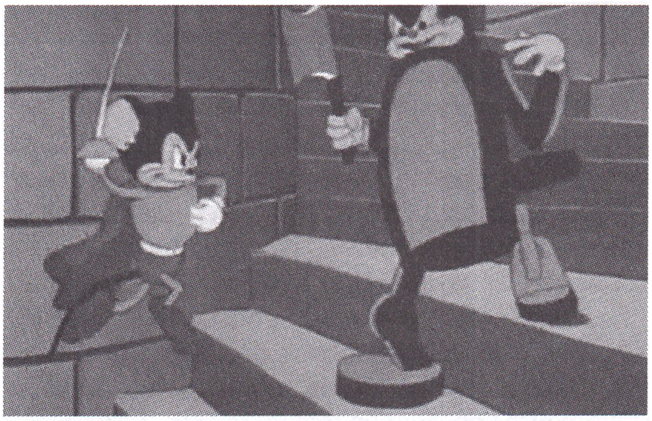


"Kin sort of looked like Groucho Marx and had both Groucho's sense of humor and delivery, a very funny guy. He was one of the truly gifted guys in the business, very smart and very talented." —Al Jaffee

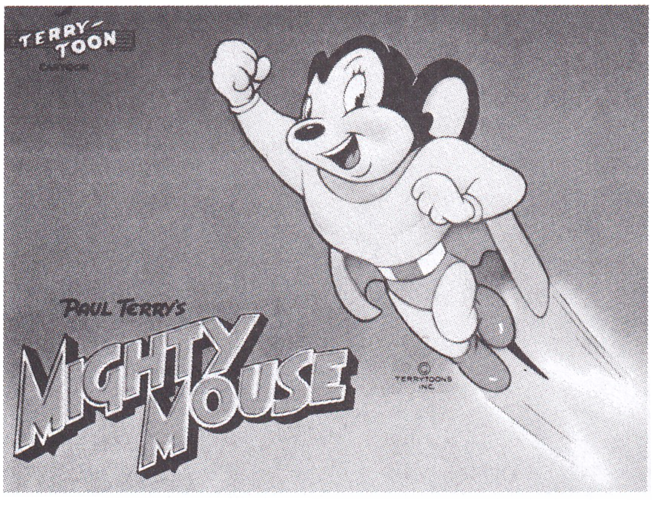
coincidence," Platt recalled, "but we had it first. They had to change to 'Mighty Mouse.'" Terrytoons' Super Mouse appeared in seven animated shorts before being rechristened "Mighty Mouse" in 1944's *The Wreck of the Hesperus*.

Mighty Mouse appeared in eighty theatrical cartoons between 1942 and 1961, with the dialogue sung operetta style beginning with 1945's *Mighty Mouse and the Pirate*. CBS purchased the Terrytoons Studio in 1955, and *The Mighty Mouse Playhouse* became a staple of the network's Saturday morning lineup from 1955 through 1967.

Meanwhile, the original Supermouse went on to become Standard's longest-running comics feature, outlasting the Black Terror and all the superheroes published by Timely, MLJ, Quality and even DC's All-American imprint. Kin Platt was only able to complete the first two stories before he was called up for WWII military service. The adventures of "the Big Cheese" were continued by a variety of talented comic professionals, including scriptwriters Richard Hughes (later the editor of the American Comics Group) and *Flintstones*-creator Dan Gordon, and cartoonists Milt Stein, Jack Bradbury, Carl Wessler, Al Hubbard and Gene Fawcette. Supermouse was awarded his own title in 1948 which continued to be published through 1958, several years after the Silver Age of Comics began with the debut of DC's Martian Manhunter in 1955 and the revamped Flash in 1956. Supermouse and *Coo Coo Comics* provided an early professional home for the legendary Frank Frazetta, who regularly illustrated backup humor strips and text features for Ned Pines' funny animal comics.



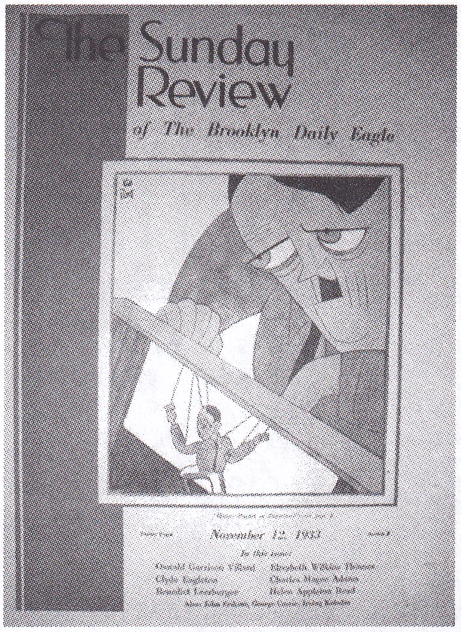
Terrytoons' rival Super Mouse battled menaces like *Frankenstein's Cat* (above) before being renamed "Mighty Mouse."



Supermouse starred in his own comic book from 1948 (left) to 1958 (right).

In creating the earliest comic book superheroes, Superman's Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Batman's Bob Kane and Bill Finger, Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, Sheldon Mayer and Will Eisner took inspiration from the supermen of their own youth: legendary pulp heroes like Tarzan, Zorro, Doc Savage and The Shadow—as did comic book pioneer Kin Platt.

A voracious reader throughout his childhood, Platt was fond of pulps, especially Western, sports and adventure stories, along with cheaply printed boys' fiction series. "I think boys read more in those days, before books became pretentious, hardcovered and high-priced, and pigeonholed into age categories. In those days, before the thirties, we had the paperback pulps with exciting sports heroes, Westerns, adventure stories: the Frank and Dick Merriwells. Rover Boys, Hardy Boys, Tom Swift and his Electric Machines, Baseball Joe. Everybody read them because they were available for ten cents a copy, sometimes a quarter. We swapped what we had read for others in the mix, and we loved them all.... Teachers didn't know or care what we read outside of school hours, and as for the effrontery



Early illustrations for newspapers like the *Daily Eagle Sunday Review* cover (left) led to Kin Platt becoming a highly paid cartoonist for the Johnstone & Cushing advertising agency (top right). In 1936, Platt drove his new Plymouth convertible to California to pursue work in radio comedy and film (bottom right).

needed to write the author of any of these potboilers, it was unthinkable. Ours was an idolatrous relationship. They were magical beings who fed words and action into our brains at regular intervals, sometimes weekly, and seemingly never lacked for inspiration or disappointed us. Girls had their own series heroines, but I can't remember them being the avid readers boys were then. Perhaps we had more varied books with exciting adventures."

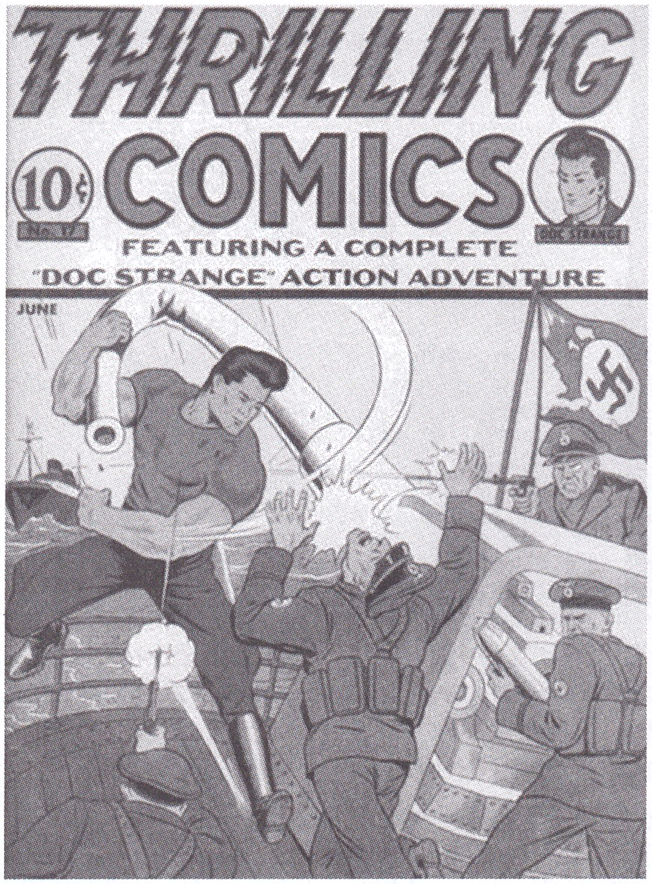
After a brief stint at Max Fleischer's animation studio, Kin began freelancing for local newspapers.

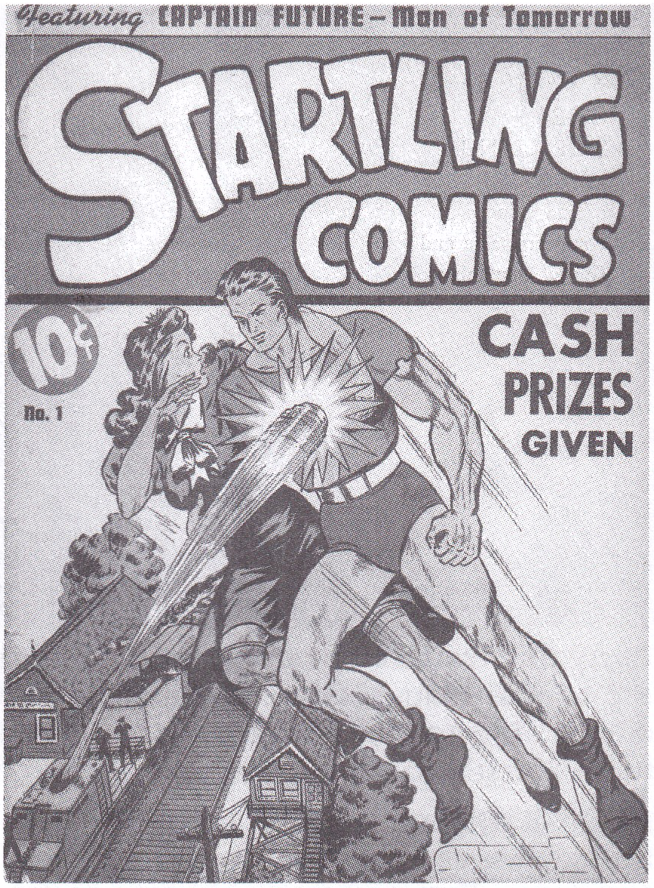
"I was on my own after finishing high school at nineteen," Platt recalled in an autobiographical article. "There was no thought of college. To my mind, it was a waste of time, and I had to make my living by drawing. A small advertising agency hired me at a few dollars a week. My job was carrying heavy packages to and from the printers. As a bonus, I was paid four dollars for any drawing I made, usually to appear in *Women's Wear*, a garment industry paper.... The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, an important newspaper of the time, took my first theatrical caricature.... It cost the newspaper nothing and was paid for by the theatrical company's publicity department. The rate was seven dollars a column. My drawing ran two columns and I was paid fourteen dollars. I was jubilant. I could pay my rent and had three dollars left for food, gas and electricity."

Platt also sold theater and film caricatures to the *World-Telegram* and *Sun*, and his portfolio of published work soon caught the eye of Tom Johnstone, the former cartoon editor of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, who was pioneering the use of comic strips for advertising with his Johnstone and Cushing agency. "We hit it off from the start, with Tom being very enthusiastic about my speed and cartoon humor.... My work became popular with the art directors of the agencies, more for its humor than skill, I believe, and I was given many national accounts to draw. Tom was assembling a corps of good illustrators for the strips; we drew various rescaled versions of the original idea, and all made a great deal of money.... I was paid over three hundred dollars a strip and on many weeks averaged over a thousand dollars, the most I had ever made for my drawing."

Not content to work exclusively in comic strips, the multi-talented Platt also tried his hand at radio comedy sketches, with Pat Weaver of the Young and Rubicam agency promoting Platt's scripts. "Comedian Jack Benny and the comedy team of

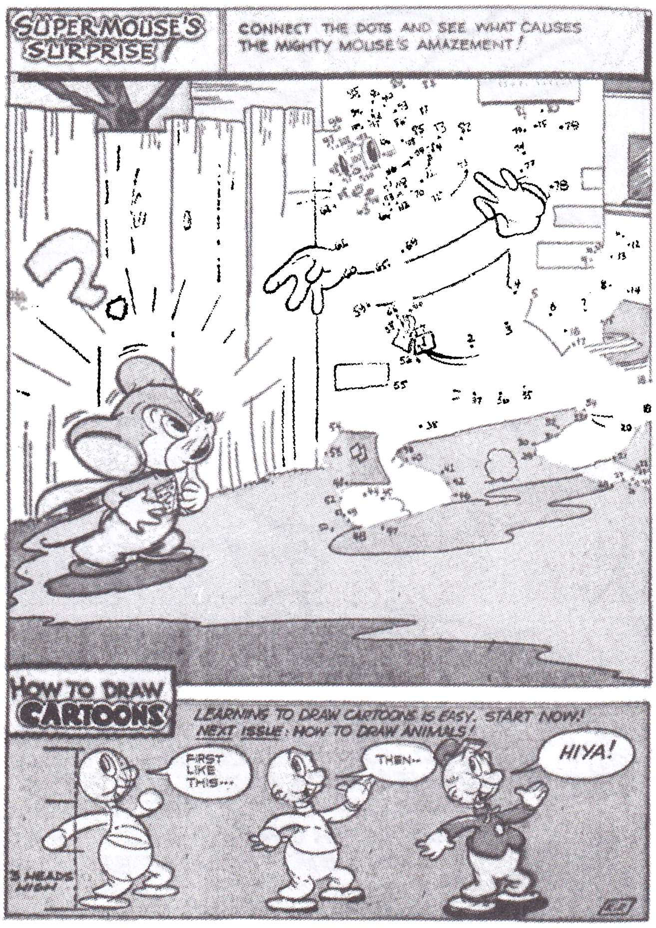
Platt family photos courtesy of Christopher Platt





Kin Platt wrote and illustrated a number of superheroes for the Nedor Comics line including (clockwise from top left) Doc Strange in *Thrilling Comics* and two superheroes he created, Captain Future in *Startling Comics* and the American Eagle in *Exciting Comics*. All three heroes were also featured in *America's Best Comics*.

Stoopnagle and Budd arranged for their use. F. Chase Taylor (Stoopnagle) asked to meet me in Hollywood. I had just bought a brand-new 1936 Plymouth convertible with custom-fitted Dunlop high-speed tires. It cost nine hundred dollars. You couldn't buy a bumper for that today. I was young and reckless, eager to get out there, and reached the West Coast in under four days.



"I relocated to Hollywood in 1936 to pursue full-time radio work, and wrote radio comedy sketches for Jack Benny, Stoopnagle and Budd, Burns and Allen, Edgar Bergen, Ken Murray and *The National Biscuit Comedy Hour*.... It didn't take long to discover that although I had an auspicious beginning writing multiple shows, radio comedy for a mass audience of 40 million nightly was not to my liking, nor was it my strength. My kind of humor was soft and droll, offbeat, and sometimes you had to think about it before responding. The radio comedians wanted jokes, especially those repeated enough for audiences to remember and anticipate.

"Being offered the chance to write three different comedy shows a week was heady stuff. Most writers did just one. It was a full-time job, but I was young and prolific and indestructible. Missing sleep didn't matter, and I averaged about three hours a night.... Later I realized the price to be paid for all the sudden fame and attention was too high. At rehearsal times, you went two days and nights without sleep. I was learning that a writer's life wasn't normal."

Kin Platt soon moved on to Walt Disney's story department where he "found crazy people there who were much funnier at gags than I was. At other studios I got to know absolute morons who could think up such wonderfully funny scenes that I had to admit they were more gifted than I. Sanity meant nothing with regard to absolute pure humor.

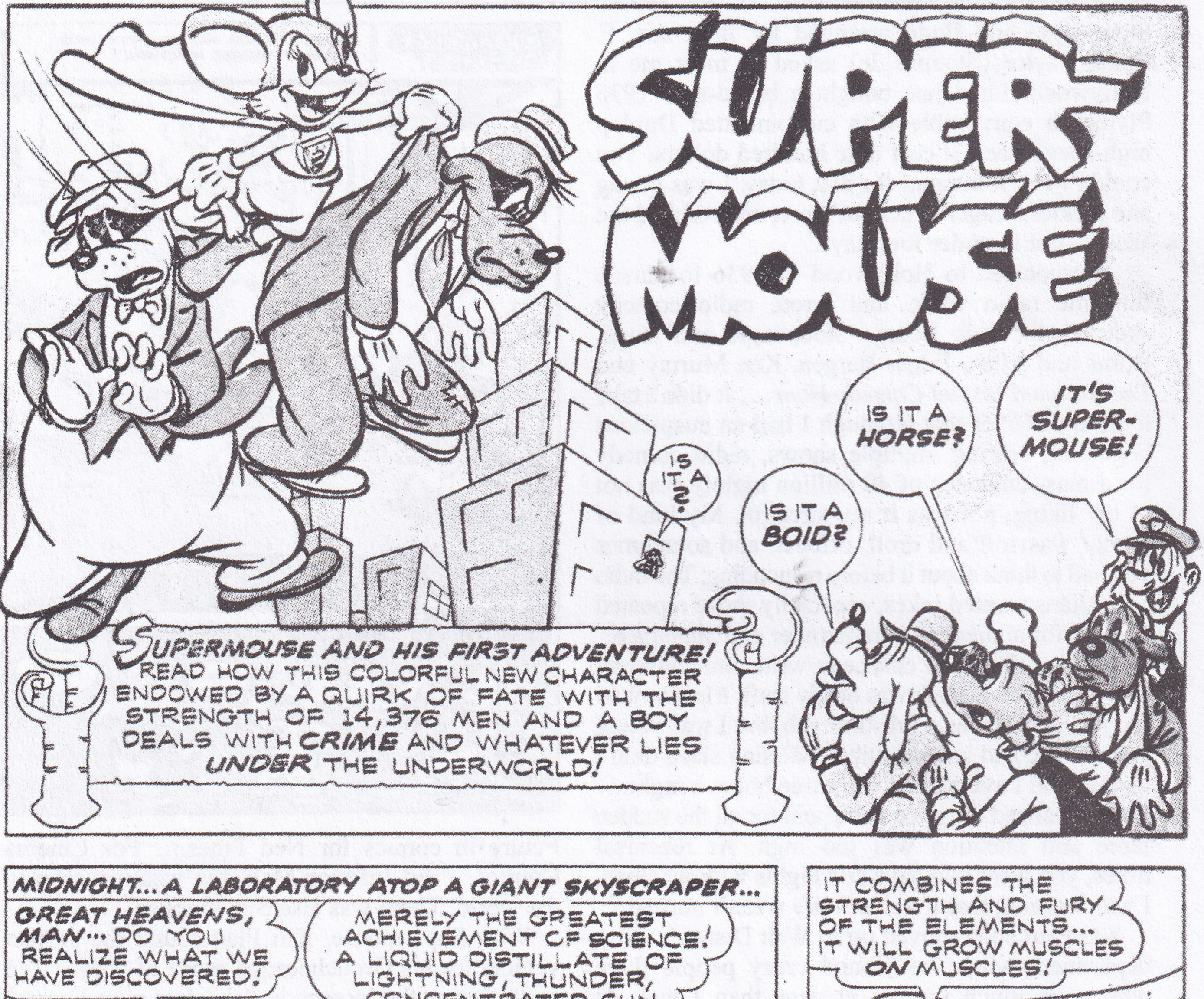
"With animated cartoons I had entered the world of fantasy, where animals and humans could interact. The story could be blown into improbable and grotesque situations but guided to the desired end—the villains would get their comeuppance, the heroes a just reward. A series of situation gags was inserted to link up the storyline. Implausible situations could be resolved quickly, needing no explanation. Any possibility was fair game in the alternate world of the animated cartoon."

Platt soon tired of toiling on staff for the Hollywood studios and returned to New York to enter the exploding new comic book field. "No more typewriter for me, I thought; it's back to the drawing board.

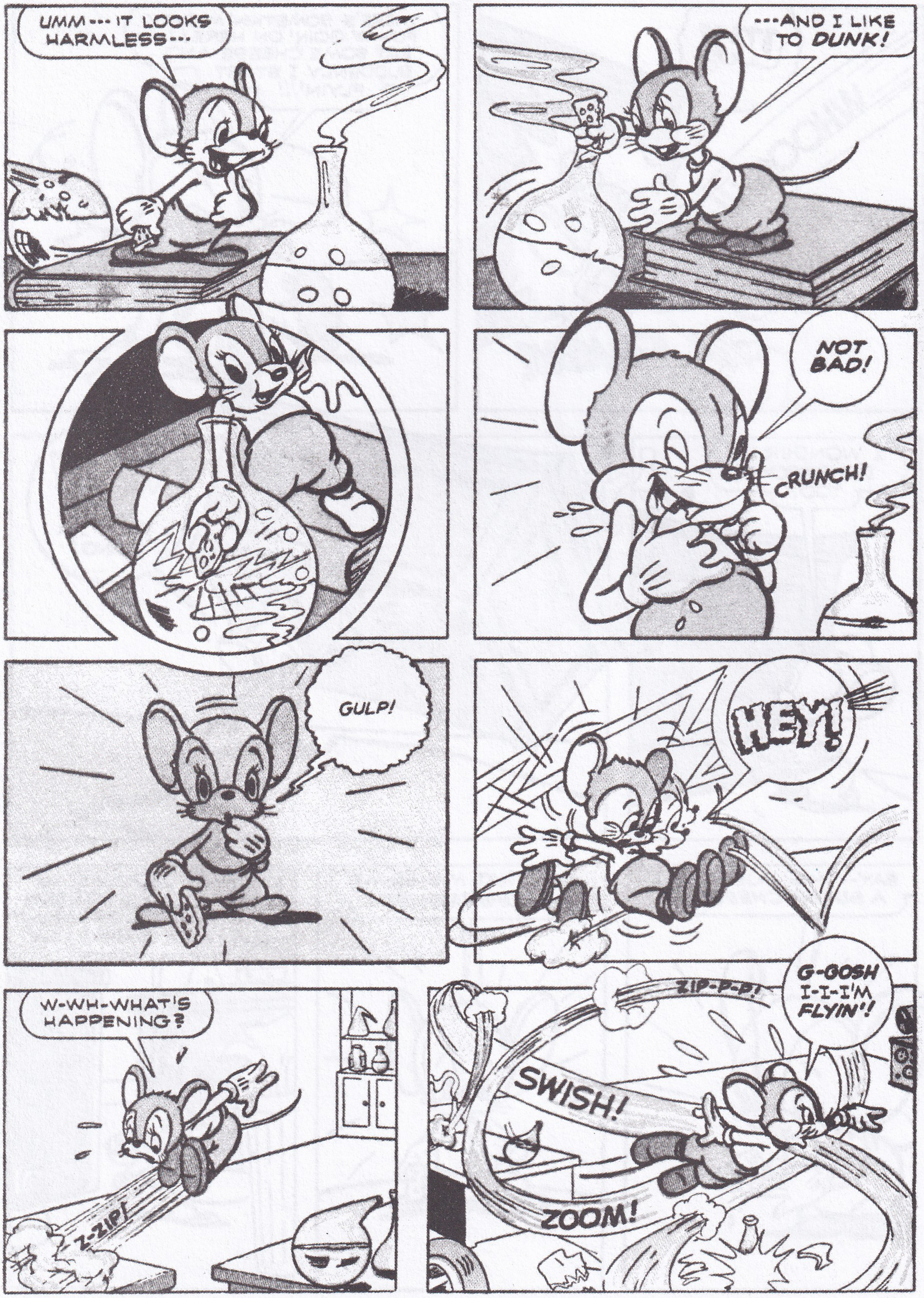
"Comic books were booming in the 1930s.... I could now combine writing and drawing. I created the superhero Captain Future in comics for Ned Pines.... For Cinema Comics, I did Inferior Man, the weakest man in the world. There was also Supermouse."

With Supermouse, Kin Platt found the perfect vehicle for his Grouchoesque sense of humor, and to showcase the lessons in "absolute pure humor" acquired during his tenure in the Disney story department. Turn the page to enjoy the origin of Supermouse as written and drawn by Kin Platt and originally published in *Coo Coo Comics* #1. •

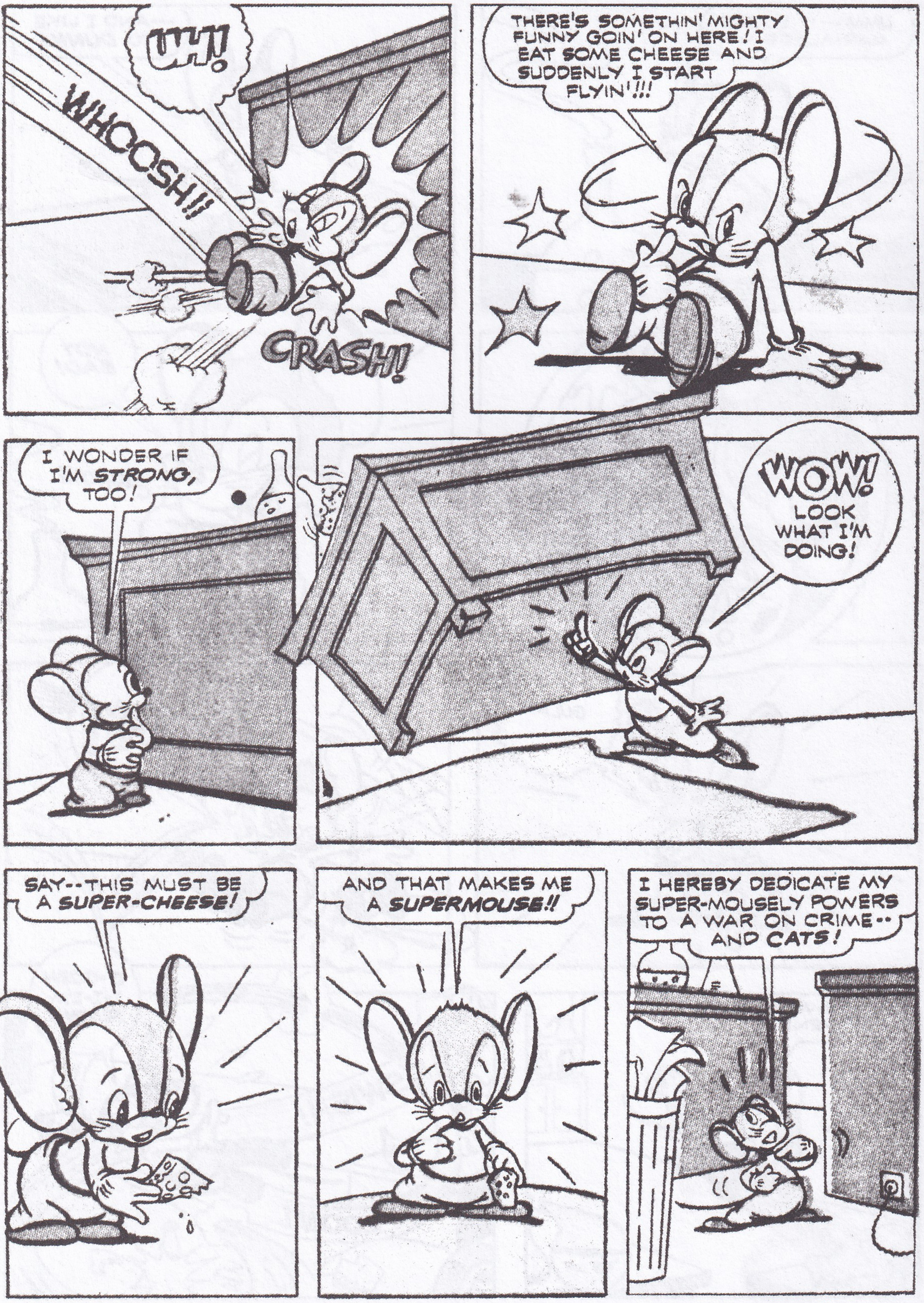
Kin Platt shares the Sunday comics with wife Ruth and son Christopher.



A 75th anniversary cartoon classic from Volume 1, Number 1 of *Coo Coo Comics*



The origin of Supermouse created, written and illustrated by Kin Platt



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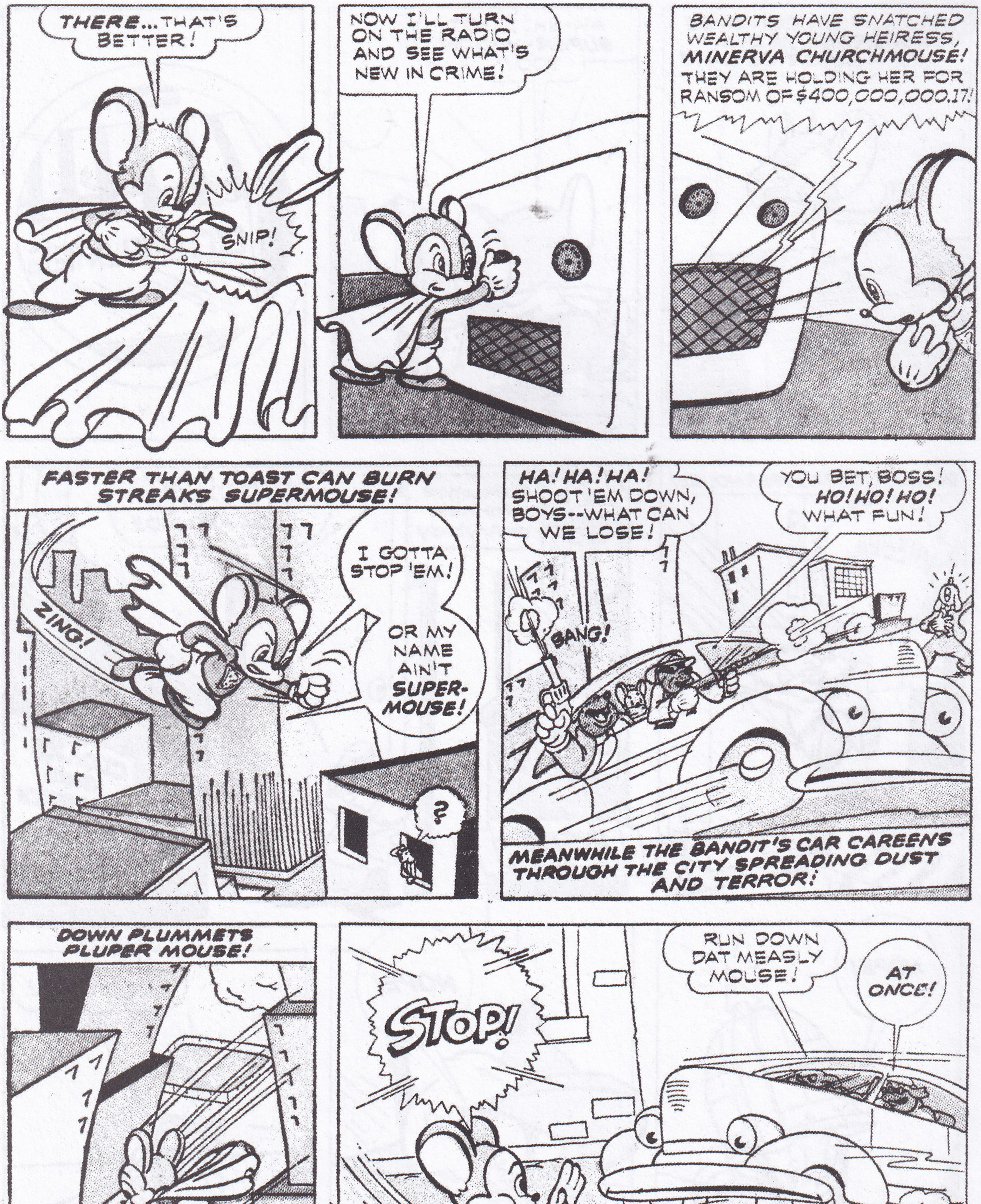

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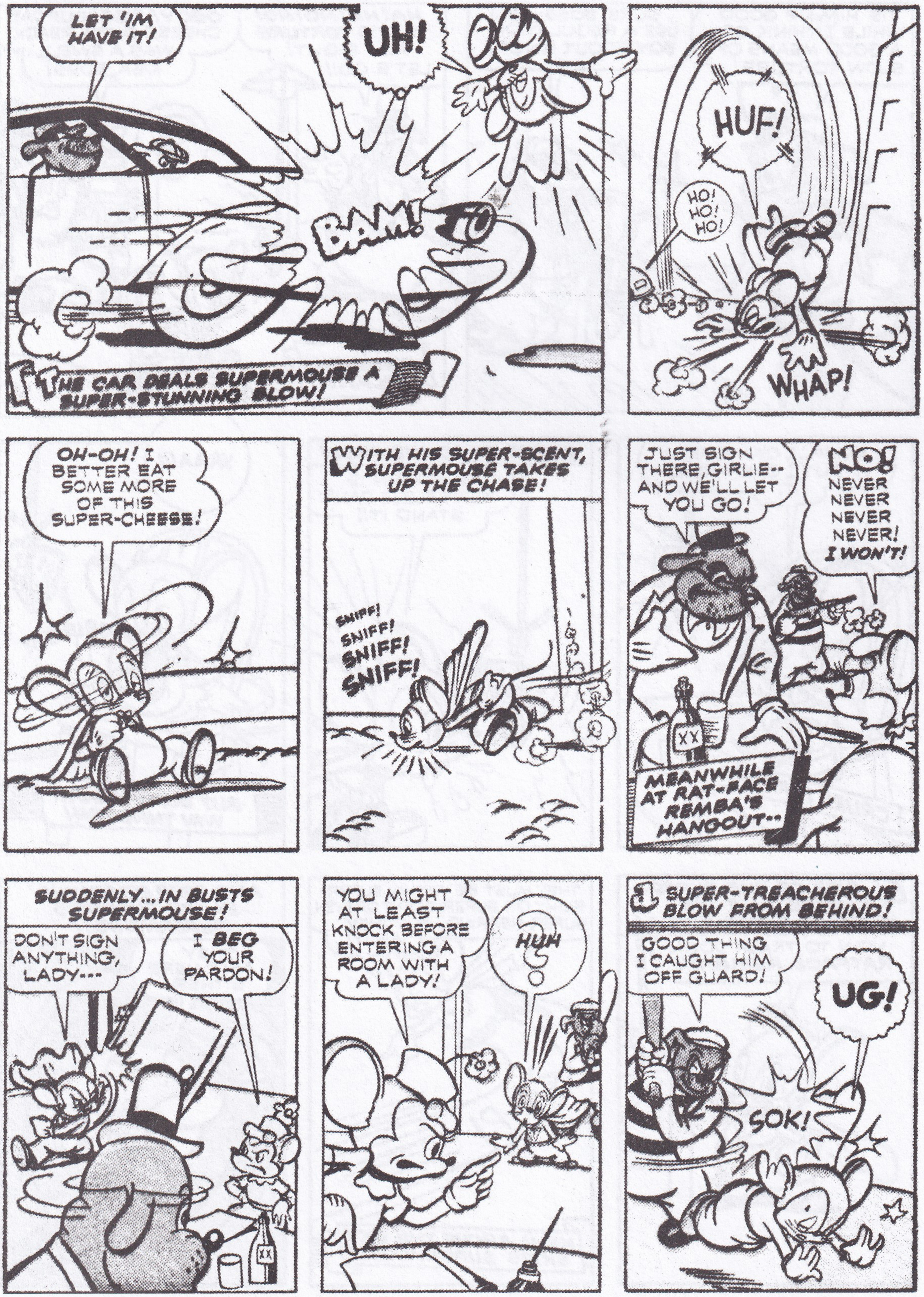

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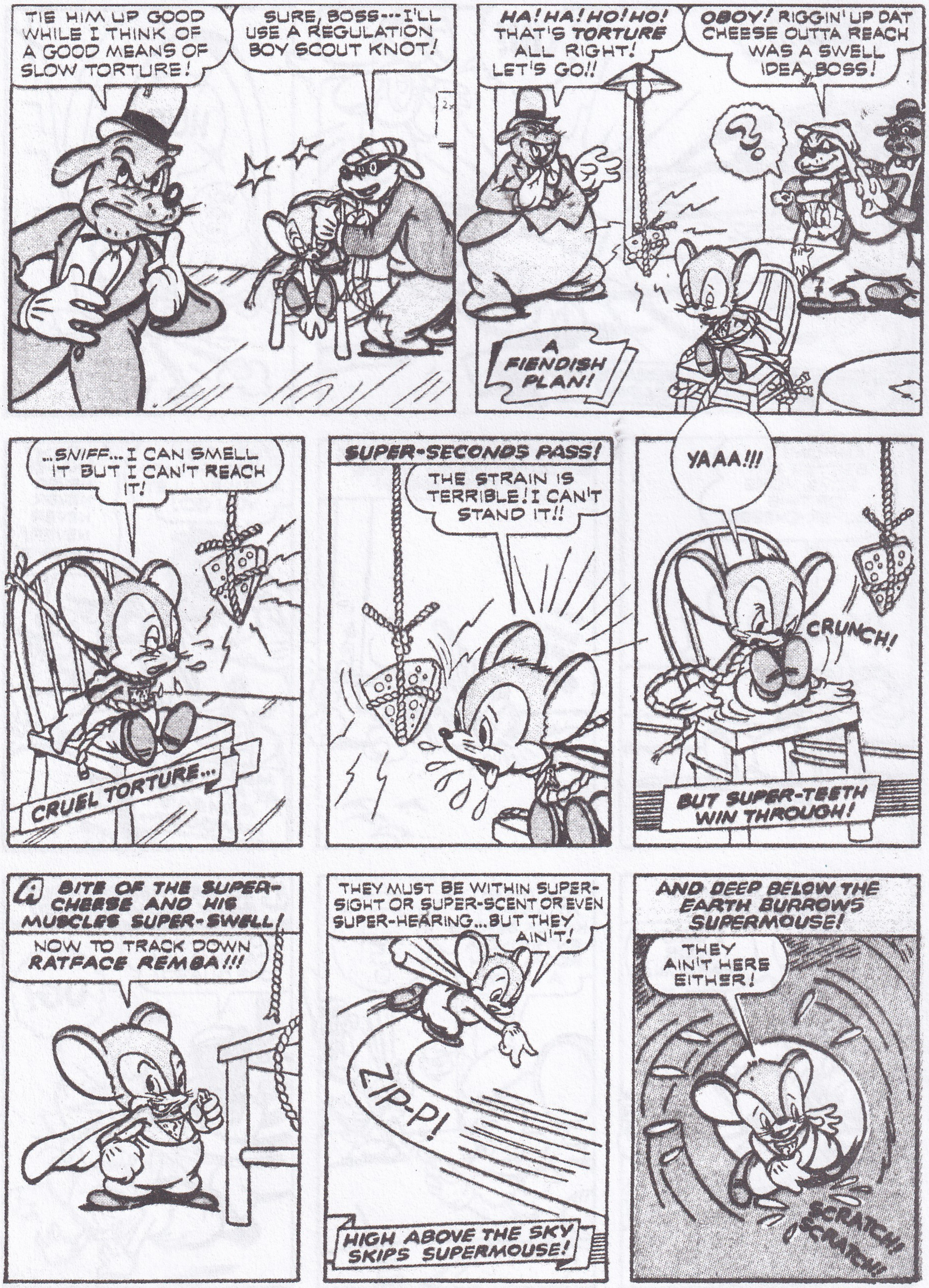

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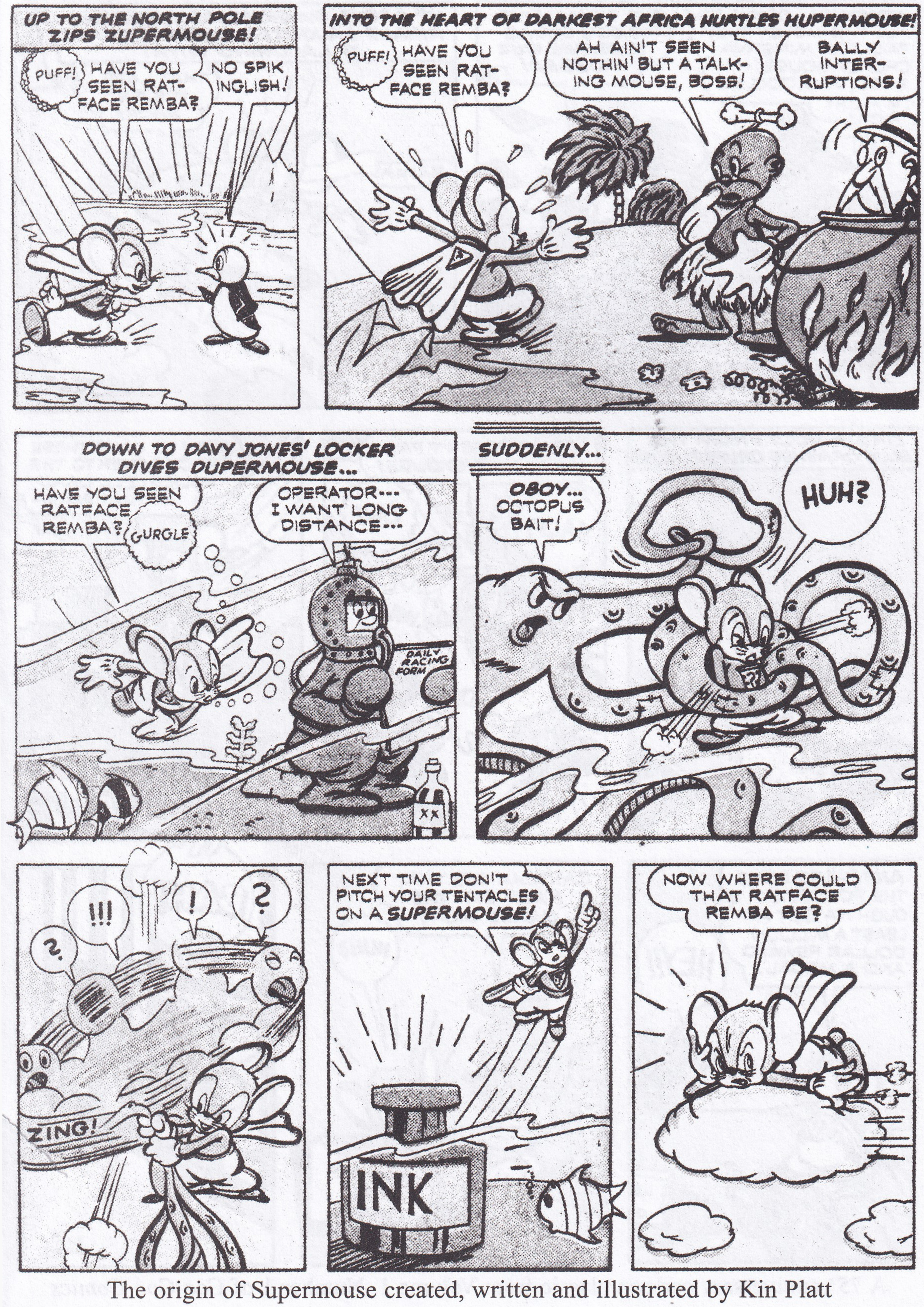
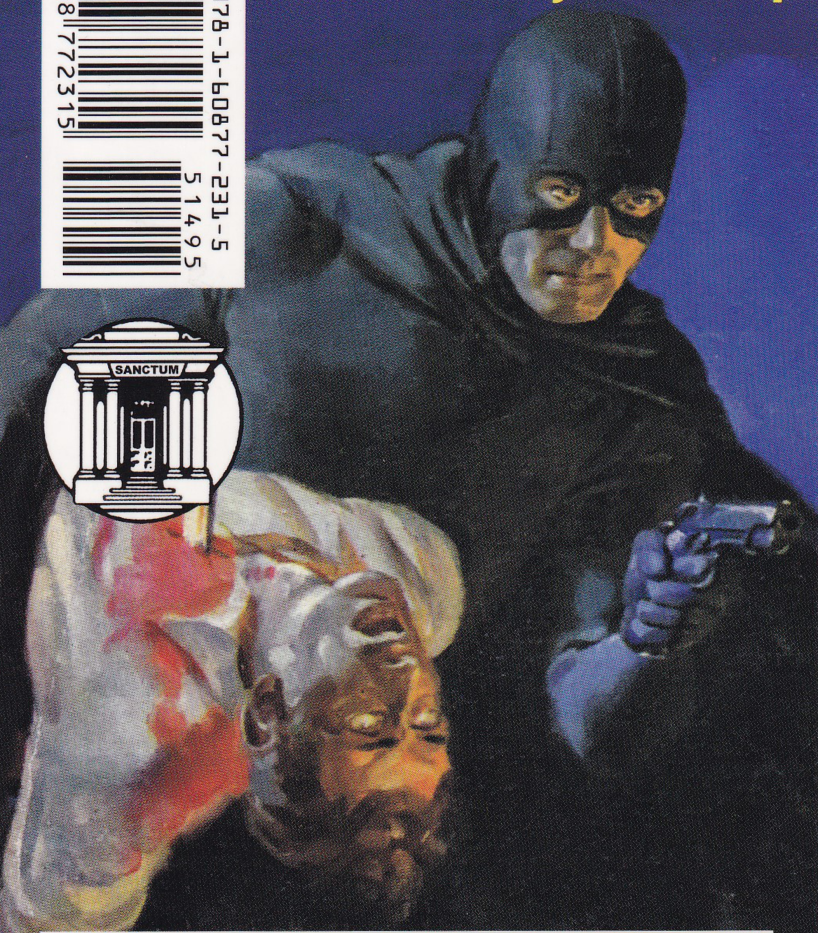


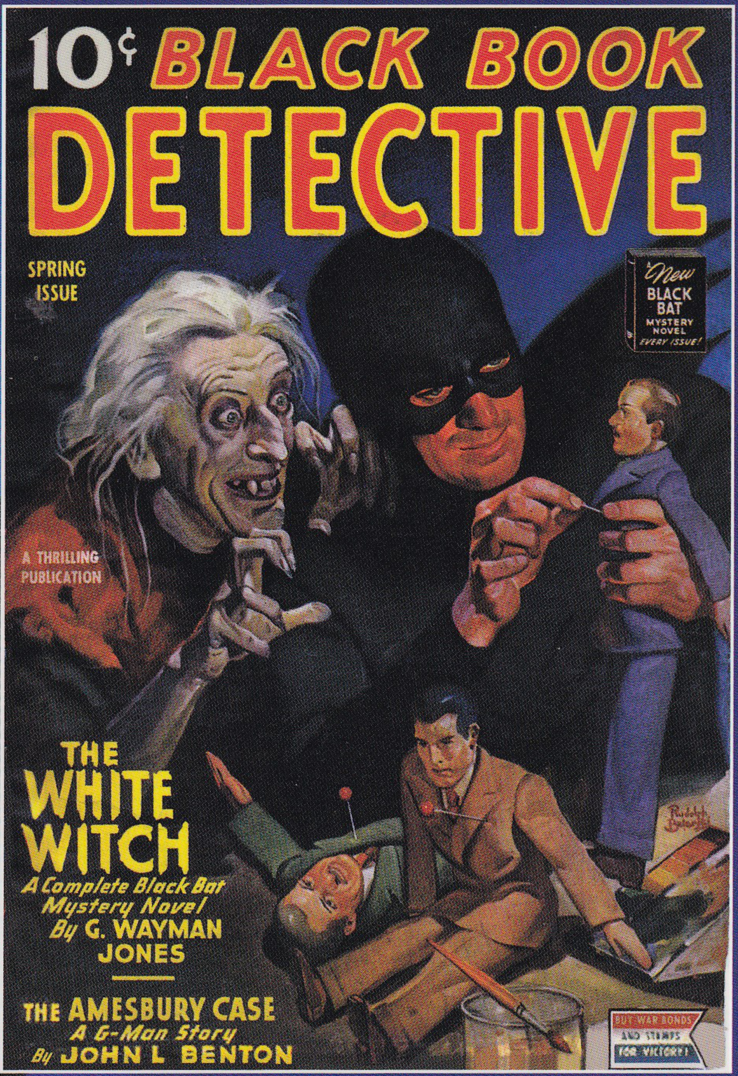
The origin of Supermouse created, written and illustrated by Kin Platt

A 75th anniversary cartoon classic from Volume 1, Number 1 of *Coo Coo Comics*

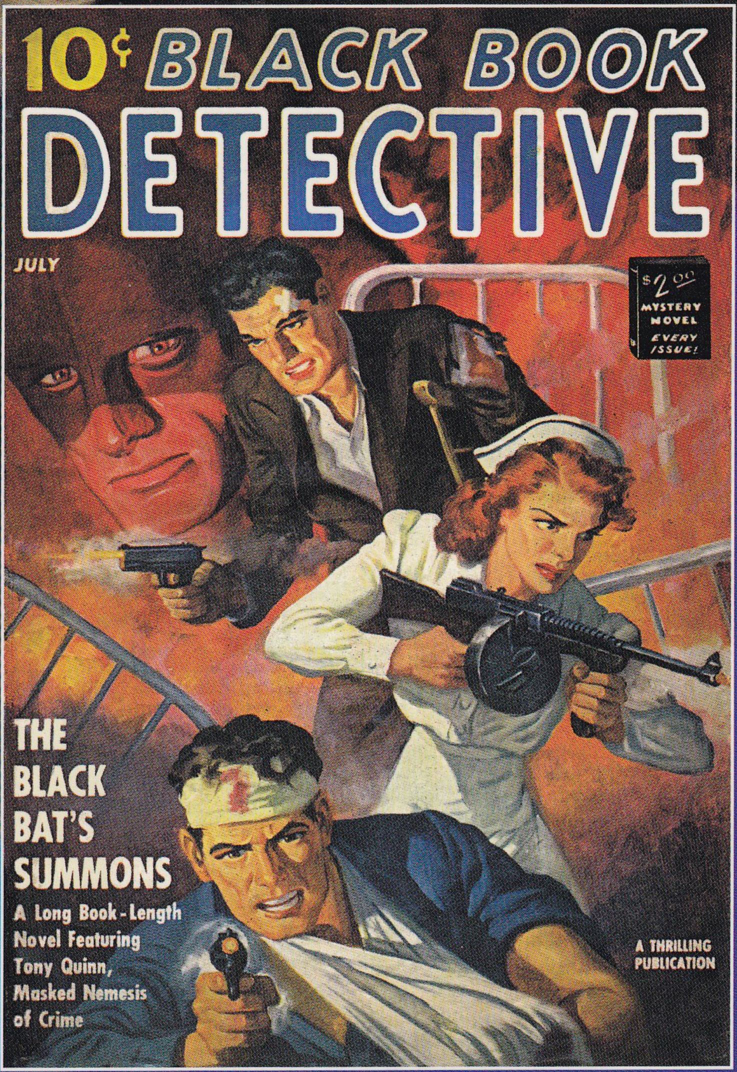
ISBN 978-1-60877-231-5

Blinded and scarred by a mob acid attack, D.A. Tony Quinn makes the night his weapon as the Black Bat, Nemesis of Crime!

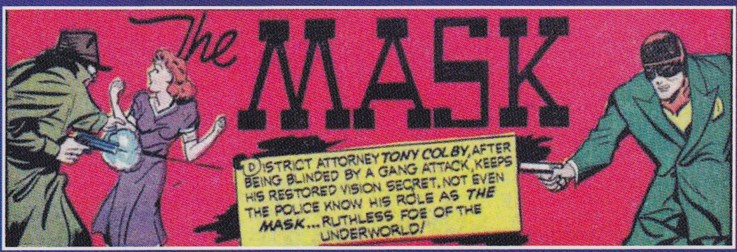
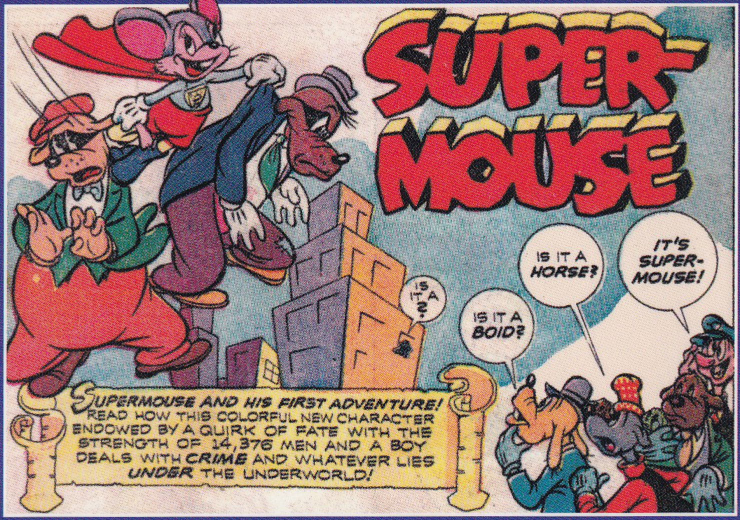




A master hypnotist materializes the Grim Reaper for his audience, hurtling Tony Quinn into a bizarre mystery.



The Black Bat fights to save his city from sinister looters with blank faces!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